

## Getting to Know the Great Lakes

### Lake Huron

#### The Old and the New Presque Isle Lighthouses



The Old and the New Presque Isle Lights are connected by habitat, history, and hauntings. Located in northeastern Michigan along the shores of Lake Huron on the north end of Presque Isle Harbor, the old and new Presque Isle Lighthouses share proximity, past histories, and paranormal visitors if earthbound witnesses are correct. Both lighthouses have museums that are seasonably open to the public.

Nineteenth century sailors sailing into the harbor and up and down the Lake Huron coast relied on Presque Isle Harbor, the only natural harbor along the rocky and

reef studded Lake Huron Coast between Detroit and Mackinac. The harbor provided a dependable wooding port before the advent of coal burning steamships and the dozens of shipwrecks lying in the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary underscore the importance of Presque Isle Harbor and its Old and New Lighthouses guiding mariners to the safety of Presque Isle Harbor.

## The Old Presque Isle Lighthouse



Built in 1840 and operational until 1870, the Old Presque Lighthouse stands at the north end of Presque Isle Harbor. It enjoyed the distinction of being the first lighthouse in the Presque Isle, Michigan region. In 1838, Congress appropriated \$5,000 to build the lighthouse, a two-thirds stone and one third brick structure.

Years of harsh Lake Huron weather battered the lighthouse tower and keeper's house and by 1867, the elements finally convinced Congress to finance a newer station, the New Presque Isle Lighthouse. The Old Presque Isle Lighthouse does not send its beacon along the Lake Huron coastline any longer, but its museum allows visitors to glimpse the importance of its past.

Some visitors climbing the steps to the tower of the Old Presque Isle Lighthouse believe they hear the steps of George Parris, the friendly lighthouse ghost beside them as he climbs the stairs to light the lamp which has not burned for decades. In 1977, Lighthouse owner James Stebbins, who had inherited the lighthouse from his father keeper Francis Stebbins, hired retired couple George and Lorraine Parris as lighthouse caretakers.

Over the next fifteen years, George and Lorraine, but especially George, gave inspiring tours of the Old Presque Isle Lighthouse and attracted visitors from far and wide. He died in January 1992, but some people, including Lorraine, believe he still watches over the lighthouse. While visiting the lighthouse, a young girl explored the tower alone. When she rejoined her parents, she told them she had been talking to a "nice old man" in the lamp room of the tower. After viewing photos in the adjoining cottage museum, she picked a photo of George Parris as the

man she had seen in the tower. She and her parents confirmed that no one else had been in the tower with her.

George's widow Lorraine had even closer encounters with him. One day Lorraine decided to leave the cottage to run an errand during a severe lightning storm. She opened the door to leave, but an invisible force blocked the door and seconds later lightning made a direct hit outside the cottage. Lorraine was convinced that George's spirit prevented her from being electrocuted.

A few months after his death, Lorraine went to dinner at their daughter's house and on the way back to the lighthouse cottage, she thought how much she missed George being at the dinner and how special it would have been to have him there. Thinking of him and their work at the lighthouse, she looked up at the tower. What she saw was impossible, but she saw it. A light glowed from the tower, although it had been permanently disconnected several decades ago.

Later when she talked about seeing the light, Lorraine said she felt like she was going crazy. As she continued to see the light, she realized she was not going crazy. She grew to believe it was the way George kept the spirit of the lighthouse alive and instead of being afraid of it, she found comfort in seeing the light that George had lit for so many years glowing from the tower.

Other people besides Lorraine have seen the light glowing from the Old Presque Isle Lighthouse tower. Some people say the light is the glow from distant light reflecting from the lantern room glass. Others believe that like other kindred spirits, the affection he had for the lighthouse and Lorraine does not die with their bodies.

The Old Presque Isle Lighthouse is one of the oldest surviving lighthouses on the Great Lakes and it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

<https://www.presqueislelighthouses.org/lighthouses/old-presque-isle-lighthouse-1840>

## New Presque Isle Lighthouse



Located a few miles north of the Old Presque Isle Lighthouse, the New Presque Isle Light Station is a complex that includes a lighthouse tower and two keeper's residences. Built in 1870 to replace the 1840 Harbor Light (The Old Presque Isle Lighthouse), the New Presque Isle Light is the tallest lighthouse tower offering public access on the Great Lakes.

Part of a 99-acre Township Park, the complex features a playground, pavilion, picnic area, and nature trails. A museum connected to the tower is situated in the original keeper's quarters.

Commercial traffic on the Great Lakes after the Civil War, Brigadier General Orlando Metcalfe Poe, and an anonymous lightkeeper's wife shaped the history of the New Presque Isle Lighthouse. Ship traffic on the Great Lakes grew and impacted like Lake Huron storms after the Civil War. Guides to navigation ranked topmost in importance for crews and cargo traveling the lakes. This development and deterioration of the Harbor light motivated Presque Isle people to agitate for the building of a new lighthouse which would be located on the north end of the Presque Isle Peninsula.

Brigadier General Orlando Metcalfe Poe presented plans for the new Presque Isle lighthouse in July of 1870. A West Point graduate, General Poe advanced his career to become a topographical engineer as part of the Survey of the Upper Great Lakes. General Poe had also earned distinction during the Civil War by aiding Major General George B. McClellan organizing the defense of Washington D.C. and commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan Volunteer Infantry. In 1863 he played a pivotal role in defending Knoxville, Tennessee against a Confederate siege and in 1864 General William T. Sherman appointed General Poe chief engineer and General Poe participated in Serman's March to the Sea.

This engineering and organizational experience prepared General Poe for his 1865 position as chief engineer of the U.S. Lighthouse Board and his 1870 position as Chief Engineer of the 11<sup>th</sup> Lighthouse District which focused on the Upper Great Lakes. He developed a design, later called “Poe style lighthouses,” and nine lighthouses including the New Presque Isle Lighthouse were built based on his design. General Poe continued his groundbreaking work by serving as Superintending Engineer for improving harbors and waterways on Lake Huron and Lake Superior, 1883. His engineering achievements at this stage of his career included developing the St. Mary’s Falls Canal and building the first Poe Lock as part of the Soo Locks at Sault Ste. Marie. The Soo Locks allowed steel hulled freighters access to the Upper Lakes, allowing America’s steel industry to lead the world for decades. The New Presque Light is the only Poe light on Lake Huron.

Ghosts supposedly inhabit the New Presque Isle Lighthouse, but George Parris of the Old Presque Isle Lighthouse seems to have confined himself to his Old Presque Isle Lighthouse stomping grounds. The ghost at the New Presque Isle Lighthouse is a former keeper’s wife who was held captive in the lighthouse. She suffered from her solitary confinement to the point where she went insane. Lighthouse visitors say that they hear her anguished cries for help.

The New Presque Isle Lighthouse Museum features a well preserved Third Order Fresnel Lens. Frenchman Augustin Jen Fresnel designed his lens to feature a large aperture and short focal length omitting the mass and volume of material in a conventionally designed lens. A Fresnel lens is thinner than a conventional lens and its refracted light travels greater distances across the water. It can take the form of a flat sheet. Starting in the 1840s, the lens has been used in the United States and it is often called “the invention that saved a million ships.” In 2003, administrators removed the Fresnel lens from the New Presque Isle Light House and stored it for about ten years when it was renovated and placed on display in 2012. The United States Coast Guard owns the Fresnel Lens, which is a centuries old modern marvel into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<https://www.michigan.org/property/new-presque-isle-lighthouse-park-and-museum#:~:text=Presque%20Isle%20Light,a%20spectacular%20view>.



# Lake Ontario

## The Phantom Ship of Etobicoke



### Portrait Dream

I, Rowley Walter Murphy

Artist of Great Lakes life,

Dream portrait.

Picture an August 1910 night

The mouth of Etobicoke Creek,

After dinner we sat on the deck of the yacht,

My companions and I, our conversation touching the stars.

We went to bed early,

Fell asleep in our bunks rocked by lullaby waves.

A distress signal,

Four blasts of a steamer's whistle,  
It had to be a dream,  
Four blasts again.  
Head out of companionway, I saw her,  
About a half a mile offshore, the moonlit steamer advancing half speed.  
White topsides and deckhouses, gray below her main deck.  
Starboard and deck lights oil lamp quality.  
Lights shining through cabin windows, people silhouettes,  
Mast with fitted topmast; braided up mainsail.  
Smokestack all black; four white lifeboats.  
Chime whistle continued to sound for ten minutes.  
Collecting dinghy from the harbor crew,  
Men aboard three yacht boats, rowing out to help distressed steamer,  
Whistle blowing location...no steamer.  
Moonlight glaring on waves,  
Settling over curving ripples, circular pattern,  
The gulls flying in sleepy circles,  
I still draw and dream.  
Rowley Walter Murphy

Rowley Walter Murphy RCA, OSA, FCA (1891-1975)

A painter, draftsman, commercial artist, illustrator, educator and Canada's oldest World War II War Artist, Lieutenant Rowley Walter Murphy R.C.N.V.R. was born in Toronto, Ontario lived there his whole life and died there. His works are in numerous museum collections including the Royal Ontario Museum, the Canadian War Museum, and the National Gallery of Canada.

## Dwight Boyer

Dwight Boyer (November 18, 1912-October 15, 1978) was a reporter and Great Lakes maritime historian. He wrote numerous books about the Great Lakes, including *Ghost Ships of the Great Lakes*, in which he tells this story in the forward, pages 16-19.

[google.com/books?id=R5E7AgAAQBAJ&pg=PA200&lpg=PA200&dq=dwight+boyer+etobicoke+creek&source=bl&ots=lylHdRidDD&sig=ACfU3U3POUvkaAq1xITpbchM\\_z\\_K\\_](https://www.google.com/books?id=R5E7AgAAQBAJ&pg=PA200&lpg=PA200&dq=dwight+boyer+etobicoke+creek&source=bl&ots=lylHdRidDD&sig=ACfU3U3POUvkaAq1xITpbchM_z_K_)

# Lake Michigan

## Three Crucifixes, Little Traverse Bay, and a Sixty Year Mystery

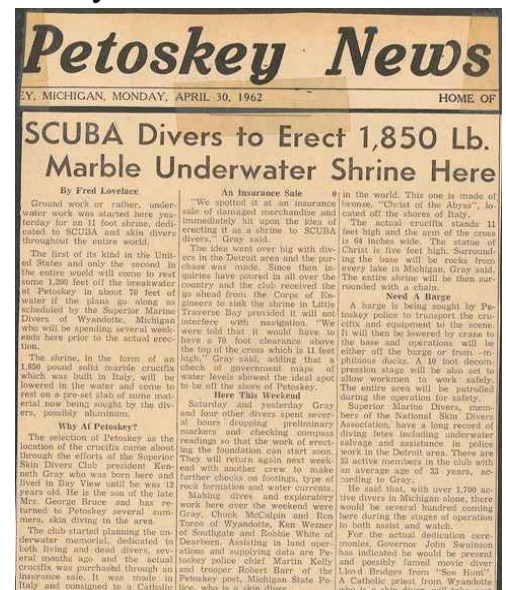


break wall in Petoskey, Michigan.

The crucifix is an 11-foot tall, 5-foot 5-inch figure of Jesus Christ, and although it arrived in Petoskey in 1962 taking a circuitous route, it attracts divers and visitors who brave water and weather conditions to see it. The Superior Marine Divers Club based in Wyandotte, Michigan, brought the crucifix to Petoskey in 1962 to honor Charles Raymond, a Southgate diver, who drowned in Torch Lake, located in northwestern Michigan. The placing of the statue in the bay attracted several hundred people and several dignitaries. Superior Marine Divers Club

The crucifix lies under twenty-one feet of water on a specially made platform in Little Traverse Bay in Petoskey, Michigan.

An Italian white marble crucifix, the only known freshwater underwater crucifix, lies about eight hundred feet offshore under twenty-one feet of water in Little Traverse Bay at Bayfront Park near the





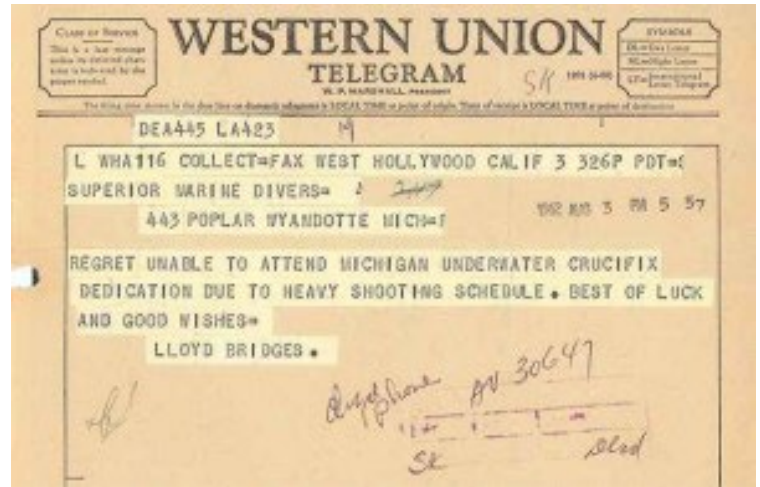
officials invited actor Lloyd Bridges, famous for his television series Sea Hunt, but he sent a telegram regretfully declining the invitation because of a heavy movie shooting schedule. Eventually, the club widened its scope to include all of the people who perished at sea.

In the early 1980s, after the Crucifix had spent about twenty years at the bottom of Little Traverse Bay, the Skindiving Council raised it to install a new base, and then put it back into Lake Michigan. Also in the early 1980s, the Little Traverse Bay Dive Club introduced winter viewings of the crucifix, inviting people to view it through a hole in the ice, against a backdrop of submerged lights.

About 20 years after it was submerged in the bay, the Michigan Skindiving Council lifted the crucifix from the water to install a new base, and it was lowered back into the lake.

In the early 1980s, the Little Traverse Bay Dive Club proposed winter viewings of the crucifix, giving the community a chance to see it through a hole in the ice, with submerged lights illuminating the sculpture. Usually taking place in late February or early March when the ice was thickest, viewings are free, and organizers set up a tent to shield visitors from the wind.

In 1986, Denny Jessick from the Little Traverse Bay Dive Club who had visited the underwater crucifix many times, decided that other people should enjoy its tranquility and meaning. He helped organize winter viewings of the crucifix, giving the community a chance to see it through a hole in the ice, with submerged lights illuminating the sculpture. Rick Hoig, Dennis's dive partner helped organize the viewing of the underwater crucifix and divers clean the crucifix and fix the light illuminating it for the public. Despite what he had already accomplished, Dennis still wondered about the history of the crucifix. He had heard the stories that it had originally been owned by a family who had purchased it to

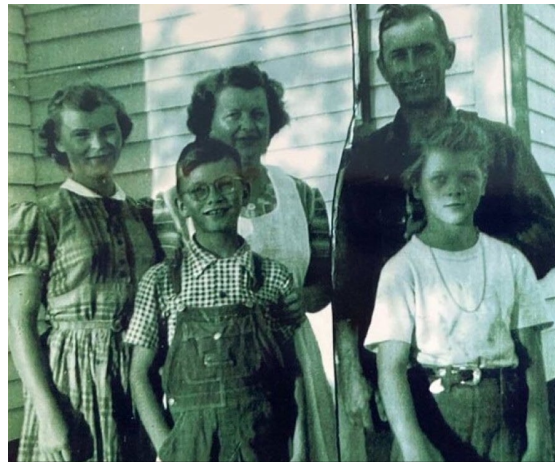


honor a son who had died in a car accident, but there were gaps and questions in the story that he felt compelled to investigate.

Morgan Springer produced the story that Dennis uncovered for a program called Points North, a show about the people and geography of The Great Lakes. “The Mystery of the Underwater Crucifix” tells how Dennis uncovered the complete history of the cross and the family who bought it. After many detours and tips and interviews with various people, his search led Dennis and his wife to the Rapson, Michigan farm of the Schipinski family. There they met Bob Schipinski and his wife Arlene. Dennis and his wife talked to the Schipinskis and they discovered that Bob was the son of Leona and Matt Schipinski. His siblings include two sisters, Beverly and Joyce and his brother Gerald who died before Bob was born.

Dennis finally heard the story behind the original Little Traverse Bay crucifix. It was 1956- and fifteen-year-old Gerald, a high school freshman, was growing up on the family farm. He liked horses and reading and playing Monopoly with his sister.

One sister described what happened during an ordinary chore until it turned tragic. Gerald rode out to a field on a tractor to bring a ditcher home. He saw some crows overhead and he thought he would shoot some crows. He grabbed his gun and rode the tractor across the field. Then the gun started falling and discharged into his chest.



The Schipinski family in 1945. From left to right: Beverly, Gerald, Leona, Matt, Joyce and Tippy the dog.

Working in a nearby field, Gerald’s Dad Matt saw the tractor and sensed something was wrong. He ran home, jumped in the car, and drove out there and saw what happened. Matt grabbed Gerald, carried him into the car, and sped to the hospital. Gerald died.

In an unusual move, after their son died, Gerald’s parents decided to order a crucifix from Italy and place it at the Catholic church down the road. None of the Schipinskis remembered how Matt and Leona ordered the crucifix or why they ordered it from Italy, but Dennis saw records that revealed they paid \$2,500 for it, a substantial sum in the early 1960s. The crucifix arrived broken like the hearts of

Gerald's parents over his death. They ordered a second crucifix with the insurance money from the first one and left the first broken crucifix from Italy sitting in its crate at the back of the church. During an insurance sale, the Wyandotte Dive Club bought the crucifix for fifty dollars and eventually transported it to Little Traverse Bay. On August 12, 1962, six years after Gerald's death, the U.S. Icebreaker Sundew carefully lowered the crucifix into Lake Michigan into Little Traverse Bay, 1,200 feet off the Petoskey break wall.

In 2019, Bob and Arlene Schipinski viewed the crucifix shimmering at the bottom



of Little Traverse Bay. Arlene said it felt “kind of like church,” and Bob said that the waves and ripples on the cross were “very surreal, very peaceful.” The Schipinskis prayed and then walked slowly back across the ice to the Petoskey, Michigan shore.

When the ice is thick enough in winter, the Little Traverse Bay Dive Club sets up a tent in the viewing area which alerts the

public that they can view the crucifix. They also publicize the viewing in the local media and on the local Chamber of Commerce and Visitor's Bureau websites. People line up to view the underwater crucifix.

<https://beltmag.com/author/mspringer/>

<https://www.detroitcatholic.com/news/why-petoskey-s-underwater-crucifix-hasn-t-been-visited-in-more-than-2-years>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZx9wjUDsdI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JWHdhoPzQA>

# Lake Erie

## Harboring Hulett's



Hulett's in Conneaut, Ohio. The St. Lawrence Seaway Port

### George Hulett Has an Idea

Conneaut native George Hulett, who many people considered a rather eccentric inventor-type person, had an idea. Instead of droves of dock workers loading and unloading iron ore and other commodities, why couldn't a machine be used to do the unloading and save labor, time, and costs?

True, some companies used primitive loading and unloading machines, but they did not seem to be completely effective. It would take him some years of hardship and setbacks, but he persevered and invented until his name and machine became household words.

George Hulett was born on September 26, 1846, in Conneaut, Ohio. His family moved to Cleveland when he was twelve years old, and he graduated from the Humiston Institute in 1864. After his graduation, he moved to Unionville, Ohio and operated a general store until he returned to Cleveland in 1881, where he and his brother, William, went into business together until George left in 1890.

In 1890, George explored the possibilities of the coal and iron ore handling industry and by the late 1890s he worked at the firm of Webster, Camp & Lane of Akron, Ohio. His company manufactured heavy equipment, including the new prototype of a coal dumper for loading lake boats that George had invented. George continued his experiments and created his Hulett ore unloader in 1898. In



1899, George enjoyed the honor of seeing the first Huletts unloader, 1,500 tons strong, being used on the docks in his hometown of Conneaut.

George Hulett served as manager of the Ore and Coal Handling Department of Webster, Camp & Lane until the company went bankrupt about 1903. After the bankruptcy, Samuel Wellman of Cleveland, a prominent mechanical engineer acquired George's patents. The Wellman Engineering Company and its successors, the Wellman-Seaver-Morgan Company and the McDowell-Wellman Company built most of the Hulett unloaders.

In 1918, George Hulett left Wellman retiring to Florida. He died January 12, 1923, in Daytona, Florida.

### Hulett's Dot the Horizon

In 1898, George Hulett saw his dream of a machine to efficiently and economically unload iron ore from lake freighters become a reality, when the first Hulett ore unloader was patented and produced. But he had a little help from Andrew Carnegie.

At this point in time, Andrew Carnegie had built a steel empire in America. His power and money extended throughout Ashtabula County and regional Ohio and Pennsylvania. Industry legend has it that when Carnegie heard that Webster, Camp & Lane Company in Akron had built a Hulett unloader at the Conneaut Dock at its own expense. George Hulett and his friends had convinced Andrew Carnegie to try the new idea, but Carnegie had his conditions. He said if the new machine worked he would buy it, but if it did not work Webster, Camp & Lane would have to get rid of it at their own expense.

In 1898, the Hulett was tested at Conneaut, and it passed with flying colors. Andrew Carnegie bought it for \$40,000 and ordered two more.

Operational in 1899, at first glance, the Hulett did not appear to be much of an improvement from the unloaders it was designed to replace. A large and cumbersome machine, it weighed 950 tons and measured eighty-eight feet high and thirty-six feet wide at its base. The Hulett's main girder was 134 feet long and extended over five loading tracks. The digging leg was attached to a 94-foot-long walking beam and the bucket was attached to a 58-foot-long digging leg.

The Hulett operator entered the cargo hold of the vessel with the digging leg and bucket and controlled all operations of the digging device. People involved with Hulett operation agreed that it required about five years to train an efficient Hulett operator.

Despite its drawbacks, the Hulett proved its worth. It could dig seventeen tons of ore from a vessel in fifty seconds. It was steam powered and did not require the expensive cables that other machines needed to operate.



By 1901, five Hulettts operated on the Conneaut docks. In 1905, Lorain had five Hulettts and by 1908, the Superior dock in Ashtabula employed Hulettts. Altogether, 80 Hulett unloading machines were built between 1898 and 1960. In 1960, the last Hulettts were built at Lorain, Ohio.

The Hulett era ended in the early 1980s when the steel industry began extensively using self-unloaders for iron ore. By 1999, Cleveland had four Hulettts, but they were not being used. The Ashtabula Hulettts were scrapped in the early 1980s. By 1992, five idle

Hulettts languished on the Conneaut docks.

Today, Hulett accessory parts and documents reside in the Conneaut Area Historical Museum while part of the Hulett itself rests outside gathering weather waiting for resources to bring it inside to preserve it as an important part of Great Lakes History.

## Lake Superior

## Silver Islet - Mining Silver Under Lake Superior



The story of the discovery of silver on a small reef in Lake Superior and how entrepreneurs and miners developed it into the first silver mine in Ontario predictably has different versions.

According to an *Iron Mountain Press* story, silver was accidentally discovered on Silver Islet, a reef on the rocky Lake Superior coast at the tip of the Sibley Peninsula in northwestern Ontario, Canada. The Sibley Peninsula itself is a 32 mile long, 6 mile wide peninsula in Ontario, Canada that projects into Lake

Superior from its north shore and separates Thunder Bay to the west from Black Bay to the east.

### Who Discovered the Silver?

Once upon a day in May in 1868, two men huddled together on a small reef about 20 feet long and only eight feet above the beach on the far northwestern Ontario shore of Lake Superior about a mile from the mainland. Lake Superior waves chased each other, combining to form mountainous white crests that pounded against a tiny reef about the size of a beach towel. A light yawl tied to a bush at the fringe of the reef snapped its hawser and the wind and waves picked it up and tossed it like a sea gull on the waves.

The two men on the reef had been prospecting and the yawl was their only transportation to the mainland a mile away over the mountains of waves. As the storm increased in violence the men were astonished to discover silver nuggets. At last the waves rushed over the crest of the reef and the larger and stronger of the two men, a Cornish miner with a stout heart, put the slender man underneath him and sat on him to keep the waves from washing him away.

The two men spent the night battling the waves that sometimes completely buried them. When the cold dawn broke, the waves receded and the friends on shore who had given up all hope of ever seeing their comrades again, took heart and managed to get out to the reef and rescue them. The rescued men hung on to their silver nuggets and resolutely decided to search for more.

Another version of the story comes from the Montreal Mining Company which had sent John Morgan and his partner Patrick Hogan to search for lead-galena samples. John Morgan threw himself flat on the ground when his partner Patrick detonated explosives to free ore from the rocks. John's outstretched hand touched Lake Superior water and when he looked down he saw several silver nuggets. Within a week, John and Patrick had sent several hundred pounds of silver ore to Montreal aboard the steamer *Algoma* as well as details about a silver vein running northwest from the reef toward the mainland.

Yet another version of the discovery story comes from the biography of [Thomas Macfarlane](#), who explored the mining country of Lake Superior for the Montreal Mining Company. In 1868, Thomas Macfarlane discovered Canada's first major silver deposit on a reef in Lake Superior that he called Silver Islet. Using his European contacts he recruited Norwegian miners to extract the silver while at the



same time managing The Wyandotte Silver Smelting and Refining Works at Wyandotte, Michigan, during the 1870s, although his connections with Silver Islet were sporadic.

### Alexander Hamilton Sibley Buys “An Engineering Nightmare”

However and whoever discovered the silver on Silver Islet, after two years of attempting to establish a mine to collect the silver, the Montreal Mining Company declared the mine “an engineering nightmare.” In 1870, Montreal Mining Company sold their land and patents to Alexander H. Sibley’s Silver Islet Mining Company for \$225,000. Alexander Sibley of Detroit headed the company and he appointed W.B. Frue as his partner and mine captain. The sale documents also reveal that Detroit merchant Eber B. Ward, merchant Edward Learned of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, contractor Peleg Hall of New York, and merchant Charles A. Trowbridge of New York were also partners in the transaction.

Born in Detroit, Michigan, on October 17, 1817, Alexander Hamilton Sibley was the son of Solomon Sibley, Detroit’s first mayor and the brother of Henry Hastings Sibley, Minnesota’s first governor. After Alexander became president of the Silver Islet Mining Company in 1870, he and his family lived in Detroit and spent their summers at the mine. Sibley’s partner William B. Frue, built them a three-story home and Marie Louise Miller Sibley had her piano shipped from Detroit every summer. He died in New York City in 1878, with his partner William B. Frue by his side. The Sibley Peninsula is named for Alexander Sibley.

### Mine Captain W.B. Frue’s “Engineering Nightmare”

In September 1870, William Frue and his engineers arrived on Silver Islet along with two horses, mine machinery, a scow, a raft of timber, supplies and thirty men. The men worked 18-hour days building timber breakwaters, foundations, and a coffer dam around the vein of silver, allowing miners to take out about seventy tons of silver ore.

Montreal Mining engineers and Silver Islet Mining Company mine captain W.B. Frue and his men waged an unrelenting battle against Lake Superior. The Silver Islet Mining Company went to work constructing wooden breakwaters around Silver Islet to combat Lake Superior waves. The Silver Islet Mining Company used crushed rock to expand the Silver Islet to over ten times its original size and it built a small mining town on the nearby shore, but Lake Superior waves were a constant, threatening presence whether in liquid foamy form, freak tidal waves or

ice surges.

William Frue and his engineers decided that a cribwork had to be built on the tiny reef and they immediately offered a reward to any man who could locate a stand of Norway pine within hauling distance. After diligent searching, a mine employee discovered a stand of pines that had withstood fires and ravages of nature. A group of axmen cut down the pine trees and with great difficulty hauled the timber to the reef.

Again, they faced challenges. Solid rock provided their only foundation, rock which slanted and in some places formed a sheer cliff that extended to the bottom of Lake Superior. After working eighteen-hour days for a month, the laborers had built 1,800 feet of cribbing, bolted it securely together and filled it in with huge rocks. The cribbing measured some thirteen feet deep and weighed several tons. On August 26, 1870, a gale from the southwest ripped away two hundred feet of this crib work.

By October 1870, Lake Superior waves had shredded half the breakwater and the miners rebuilt it to twenty-six feet wide, twice its original width. Incessantly busy, Lake Superior waves destroyed much of the cribbing before Christmas 1870, claiming 3,000 tons of rock.

Spring brought new onslaughts of Lake Superior waves. In March 1871, the Lake Superior waters of spring ripped away more than 50,000 feet of timber cribbing fastened with iron bolts. On March 8, 1871, armies of waves rushed in carrying large ice cakes and slamming them into the crib work. The huge timbers bent and broke like slender reeds. Waves washed away over 50,000 feet of timber and 6,000 feet of rock from the reef.

Along with the crib building, the Silver Islet Mining Company also mined silver, and the miners, numbering about twenty at a time, extracted over \$100,000 worth of silver while it built the preliminary crib work. After and between the storms, the miners and laborers rebuilt the breakwaters and cribs and during the summer of 1870, the miners took out a million dollars in ore. In 1871, the mine yielded 600,000 dollars' worth of silver ore and in 1872, the miners extracted \$426,000 worth of silver ore.

### The Mining Life on Silver Islet

Miners, mine operators and their families slowly came to Silver Islet, as Thomas

Macfarlane had christened their reef. They faced nature's challenges just making their way to Silver Islet. In the early days of mining, there were no railroads within five hundred miles of Port Arthur. All supplies including the materials needed to build and work the mine had to be shipped in by boat.

The winter of 1870 proved especially difficult for the miners and their families who were obliged to endure frigid temperatures and ferocious winter storms while living in tents. Mail delivery often resembled an Arctic expedition. Indian runners using dog teams followed the Lake Superior shore from Duluth, Minnesota, a small town in at the time. From Duluth, the Indians and the dog teams brought the mail north, about once a month, fighting their way through a dense 200-mile wilderness in subzero winter temperatures. The mine was shut off from civilization from November to May.

In the summer of 1871, the Silver Islet Mining Company built the mainland town of Silver Islet Landing and a breakwater, basin, and wharves in the harbor. The company built its own lighthouse and range lights to guide the ships vital for their survival into Silver Islet. The underground mining operations continued to expand deep underneath Lake Superior, and so did the above ground equipment. The company built a shaft house, engine house, rock house and pump house to keep the shaft from flooding. By the end of the summer a breakwater with a 75 foot base and 18 foot bulkheads holding 50,000 tons of rock rubble surrounded Silver Islet.

On the mainland, the Silver Islet Mining Company built a long row of houses stretching in a semi-circle along the shore of a beautiful bay called Camp Bay, back dropped by a range of low mountains. The company provided houses for hundreds of men and their families, a huge store house, a large and roomy hotel, and a large stamp mill. The company spent \$100,000 to build the stamp mill which in less than a year turned out \$225,000 worth of silver rock.

The company built a heavily barred jail for drunken and roughneck men. There were two churches, one on the curve of Camp Bay and the other farther down the bay, nestled in aspen and birch trees and Scottish rowan. On the reef were a man-made island, a huge shaft house, a powerhouse, and other necessary buildings for operating a mine. There were house barracks for the miners without families that could accommodate at least three hundred men. Mine captain William Frue constructed a three-story house on Camp Bay for President Alexander Sibley. He organized a library for the single men living in bunkhouses and located it in the saloon building, recruiting the bartender to double as a librarian.

Eventually, over 480 men worked at the Silver Islet Mining Company. They were a mixture of races and ethnic groups, including many Cornishmen who scorned the other foreigners and fought with them. Originally, William Frue had hired miners from the Keweenaw Peninsula in Michigan, but later he paid the passage to bring several hundred Norwegian and Cornish miners to Ontario. Some of the imported miners left because of the adverse working conditions that included a 60-hour work week.

The Silver Islet Mining Company paid its miners \$68 a month minus \$14 for room and board and working conditions were deplorable, even by nineteenth century standards. At the end of each shift miners had to undergo body searches to make sure they were not making off with any of the silver to supplement their wages. Anyone who refused to be searched had to pay a \$10 fine.

Strict rules like rationing whiskey consumption also did not endear the Silver Islet Mining Company to its miners. The miners had no place to buy whiskey within twenty-five miles, so a black market of sorts sprang up on Silver Islet when a few venturesome peddlers sneaked in a wretched brand of whiskey on boats. The company decided to open its own saloon to eliminate the peddler bootleg traffic.

The Silver Islet Mining Company set up its own whiskey system, allowing each man three drinks of whiskey per day, but not all at once. The company had fitted up a library and a reading room in one of its largest buildings and set up a bar at the end of the room. The bar was built so high and broad that not even the most agile miner could scale it to physically attack the bartender. In back of the bar a large blackboard sat and chalked on it were small, numbered squares. The bartender assigned each miner a number, and whenever the miner wanted a drink he went to the bar, gave his number, and got his drink. The bartender made a chalk mark in his square on the blackboard and when the miner had accumulated three marks against himself, the bartender closed his account for the day.

The miners sometimes fought with each other and a few murders occurred, but they also provided companionship to each other. From the time the last ship left in the fall until the first ship arrived in the harbor around April 1, the miners and their families had no contact with the outside world. The people on Silver Islet had to depend on their own resources and provide their own entertainment. They hunted the abundant wild game including moose, deer, caribou, bear, pheasants, partridges, and ducks. They fished in Lake Superior for whitefish and lake trout and fished the stream that tumbled down the mountain by the cemetery for brook trout. They relied on each other to survive their dangerous, pioneer lifestyle.



## Mining Silver under Lake Superior

Mining silver under Lake Superior was as dangerous as navigating the Lake that covered it. The powerhouse and the shaft house were located at the northern end of the reef and equipped with expensive state of the art machinery. The miners loaded the ore into cars which ran on steel tracks, each car with a several ton capacity. The cars brought the ore up the shaft and again the men unloaded the cars and sent the ore on to be processed and stamped. The men traveled to their work in the mine under Lake Superior using a ladder down one side of the narrow shaft.

There were no mining safety standards and every day the miners worked with the fear that their head candles would set trapped pockets of gas on fire. As the company extended the mine shaft deeper and deeper under Lake Superior, the terror the miners felt at being lowered beneath the lake increased with the depth of the shaft. Only a flimsy wooden and stone wall separated the miners from Lake Superior and the waves constantly battered it. By late October 1873, the shaft had reached a depth of three hundred feet under Lake Superior and for the first-time water entered the shaft when a vein opened into a crevice from the lake. The shaft began to fill at a rate of about ten feet an hour and the miners fled for their lives. Then two heavy storms struck within days of each other, doing about \$10,000 worth of damage to the cribs and break walls.

Despite the danger, discouragement, and disasters, the men worked the Silver Islet mine enthusiastically and successfully for many years. The silver ore they mined the first two or three years consisted of “packing” type ore, rich enough for the company to ship it away in sacks and barrels for smelting. Some of the “packing ore” brought \$7,000 per ton. Frequently the men found nuggets of pure silver and in 1873, they extracted nearly \$550,000 in silver and they also mined 20,000 tons of rock, worth \$40 to \$50 a ton to be crushed in the stamp mill.

At this point the mine shaft ran out nearly 1,300 feet under Lake Superior, with scattered levels leading away from the main shaft. Some shafts yielded poorly and brought fears that the mine had stopped producing. Then the miners would strike a bonanza shaft overflowing with silver ore.

In 1873 when the mine had been operating two or three years, silver production suddenly dropped as steeply as the mine shaft, although the men had found evidence of richer deposits. Miners broke off a corner between the sixth and seventh levels of the shaft and took sixty-five tons of rock that yielded \$113,000.

Experts estimated that from \$400,000 to \$500,000 worth of ore could be seen in the roof of one part of the mine, but they decided not to build an artificial roof to mine the ore, because the deposits below were richer yet.

### The Silver Islet Mine Shuts down and Lake Superior Reclaims the Mine

In 1875, William Frue left the Silver Islet Mining Company and mine production lagged over the next three years, despite the capabilities of his replacement Richard Trethewey. The company brought in a diamond tipped drill and struck a new vein, but production still only amounted to \$150,000 worth of silver, a deficit when compared to the cost of working the mine.

In 1878, most of the original mine had played out, but the miners discovered a second vein. The stockholders organized a new company called The Silver Islet Consolidated Mining and Lands Company with a capital stock of one million dollars. After the new company pumped out the lower levels of the mine, in 1878 it took out over \$800,000 worth of ore. The mine did not yield well in 1879, and in 1880, the output totaled a little less than \$50,000. By 1883, miners had extracted the highest quality silver and the price of silver had declined. The Silver Islet Mining Company and the Silver Islet Consolidated Mining and Lands Company had expanded the original 90 foot island ten times its size and by 1883, one of its shafts reached 1,250 feet, nearly a quarter of a mile deep.

The end of the mine came before the end of the 1883 shipping season and like the story of its beginnings, the story of the end of the Silver Islet mine has more than one version. The first version of the story says that in the late fall of 1883, a ship loaded with a cargo of coal from a southern port headed for the mine. The captain of the ship drank heavily and did not get his ship far enough north to reach Lake Superior before winter arrived. He abandoned coal delivery and winter came with only a small supply of fuel on hand. The mine's possibilities still seemed limitless, but possibilities could not make steam.

The second and more colorful version of the story says that the mine superintendent nervously noted that he only had enough coal to last until March first. The steam pumps could not operate without fuel and without the steam pumps working, the mine would flood. The mine superintendent knew that the steam freighter *H.B. Tuttle* was coming with 1,000 tons of coal which would keep the pumps pumping until spring, so he told the miners and their families not to worry.

January arrived with freezing temperatures and a frozen Lake Superior. February followed shivering cold, and work in the mine progressed slowly. Then one day the engines slowed, and the last car of ore crawled up the incline that ran down below icy Lake Superior. The mammoth pumps spluttered and chugged and then stopped. The miners quickly left their levels and escaped into the icy air. Frigid Lake Superior water advanced up the shaft, inch by inch, foot by foot as the last ton of coal burned to ashes in the giant boilers. The engines spluttered to a stop. Mining had ceased in one of the most famous mines in the world.

The Silver Islet mine had been one of the richest silver mines in the world. People considered it a marvel in modern mining and at one point the stock had sold readily at \$1,500 above par value.. Many mammoth silver nuggets had come from Silver Islet mine, some so pure they didn't need smelting and in over thirteen years of operation, it had yielded approximately 3.25 million dollars' worth of silver, \$1,300,000 in its first three years alone.

Critics of the mine management argued that if they had been more frugal the mine would have kept paying good dividends and kept pace with its silver deposit fluctuations. Occasionally rumors of reorganization of the mine and prospecting of adjoining properties surfaced. People believed Silver Islet still held unlimited riches, but Lake Superior had the last word by sending its waters to reclaim the mine.

### Silver Islet Survives and Endures

In a May 1903 story in the *Iron Mountain Press* reporting his visit to Silver Islet, reporter W.S. Harwood wrote that the mine shaft which had once led to great riches was now a column of water 1,300 feet long beneath the ice cold body of Lake Superior. He said, "I dropped a stone in the darkness and the only response was a sullen splash as it fell into this grave of many hopes."

He wrote about Captain John Cross, caretaker of Silver Islet, guiding their tour on a cold and gray day and rowing them back from the deserted reef. He noted that over on an island near the shore, he spotted blue smoke curling lazily to the sky from a clump of birches. The smoke came from the chimney of an old Cornish miner who still lived there. The old Cornish miner had spent his younger years working for the Silver Islet Mining Company and after it closed he remained searching for the missing vein which many people believed ran out from the reef to the mainland.

As ship's chief officer in command Captain Maloney, turned the prow of the *Georgia* into deeper waters, William S. Harwood noted that he saw behind him "only a string of weather beaten, paintless, time scarred houses, strung along the great curve of the bay like the beads of some huge rosary."

.Seven years later, on a summer day in 1910, a record 4,000 picknickers and cottagers visited Silver Island when the paddle wheel steamer *Forest City* carried passengers to Silver Islet. After the silver mines closed, most of the miner's cottages were deserted until the Lake Coast Transportation Company bought them. The Lake Coast Transportation Company sold many cottagers and the *Forest City* brought cottagers and supplies to Silver Islet until the advent of World War I.

One hundred years after the Silver Islet mine closed, wreckers were tearing down the old freight shed, and they discovered a sealed shipping crate. Inside the crate they found the small tombstone of a miner's child who had died during a typhus epidemic, and they speculated that perhaps the miner did not have the money to pay for the tombstone when it arrived. The miner's child likely rests in the tranquil cemetery which nature is gradually reclaiming, just as the waters of Lake Superior reclaimed the Silver Islet mine.

Today Sleeping Giant Provincial Park occupies most of the Sibley Peninsula and the Thunder Cape Bird Observatory is located at its southern tip along with the small town of Silver Islet. Time has changed Silver Islet, but its story endures as timelessly as Lake Superior waves.

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Macfarlane, Thomas. *Silver Islet*. Montreal : Dawson Bros., 1880.

## **Links with More Information About Silver Islet**

[The Sibley Peninsula](#)



[Alexander Hamilton Sibley](#)

[Major Alexander Hamilton Sibley's Sudden Death. New York Times, July 11, 1878.](#)

[Thomas Macfarlane](#)

[Pictures of Silver Islet, Thunder Bay Public Library.](#)

[Silver Islet](#)

[Silver Islet Mine Report, 1879](#)

[Marquette Engineering and Mining Journal](#)

[The Marquette Engineering and Mining Journal](#)

[Coal Mine Song](#)

MV Roger Blough. A Duluth Ship, is tied up at Pinney Dock with the first rubber cargo of 1958. Maxine Morgan



# Pinney Dock



Pinney Dock Back in the Day

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Specifications: 310 acres located on Lake Erie Storage Capacity: 200 acres of open storage (seven million tons) 400,000 sq. ft. of warehouse space 7,500 NT of bulk cargo silo storage

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