

The Story of Gordon

By Brian Finstad

The earliest evidence of human activity at what is now Gordon was a campsite found during construction of the new lane of the Highway 53 Expressway which dated to the Paleo-Indian period of between 5,000 – 8,000 B.C. At the time of first recorded European writings of this region, the area that is now the Gordon Flowage comprised vast beds of manoomin (wild rice), giving the upper reaches of the St. Croix the name the Folle Avoine Country, “Folle Avoine” being the French term for wild rice. At that time, a permanent Ojibwe village existed near the Gordon Dam, then known as Namai-Kowagon (meaning “Sturgeon Dam”) led by Chief Kabemappa of the Great Fish Clan. Kabemappa was the Chief of the entire Upper St. Croix and thus was the signer of many important treaties, including the 1825 Treaty at Prairie du Chien, 1826 Treaty at Fond du Lac, 1837 Pine Tree Treaty, 1844 Isle Royal Agreement, 1846 Treaty at LaPointe, and 1847 Treaty of Fond du Lac. Kabemappa’s village and the vicinity of Namai-Kowagon was a frequent stopping place and wintering post of fur traders, including the traders Joseph LaPrairie and Daniel Dingley, who respectively would become the grandfather and father of Sarah Gordon. In 1832 Indian Agent Henry Schoolcraft made note of the gardens of pumpkins, squash, and corn growing at the village. In 1847 Kabemappa was baptized and married at the St. Joseph Catholic Mission at La Pointe on Madeline Island, taking the Christian name of Joseph. His wife’s name was Marie Pinessi. Their marriage ceremony was likely the Christian blessing of an already existing relationship. Joseph Kabemappa had two sons, Nodin (Wind) and Oshogay (Osprey), who also became noted leaders, and a daughter, Josephthe Otchipewa, who married a St. Croix fur trader named Louis Babeux. Josephthe & Louis later relocated to Mackinac Island in Michigan. Joseph Kabemappa eventually left the vicinity of Gordon to live at LaPointe on Madeline Island, dying there of small pox March 13, 1854.

Because one could portage from the St. Croix to the Brule River, this connection has been a travel route of importance between the Lake Superior and Mississippi watersheds since time immemorial. The route however had limited utility as it could not be taken during the winter, could not be used when the water was too high, could not be used when the water was too low, and after getting out to the south shore of Lake Superior, one could become wind bound for days. Gordon lies within what is known as the Northwest Sands Ecological Landscape (our “sand barrens”), stretching on an axis from near St. Croix Falls to Bayfield. Prior to settlement and fire suppression, this large area was frequently swept by wildfire, due to the drought prone nature of the sandy soils, thus maintaining a landscape of

prairie, red pine savannah, and young regenerating forest that was far more open than the landscape we know today. This historic pre-settlement landscape can still be seen today at our Douglas County Wildlife Area, known locally as “The Bird Sanctuary.” Being high, dry, and open land, and extending on a SW/NE trajectory from the Lower St. Croix to Chequamegon Bay, the Northwest Sands was an ideal conduit of early travel. A land route alternative to the Brule-St. Croix Portage existed in the form of a footpath, beginning at the Fish Trap Rapids (below today’s “County Hwy T” Bridge) and extending across the sand barrens to Chequamegon Bay. The French referred to it as “La Grande Chamais,” or “The Grand Footpath.” In English it was known as “The Trail to LaPointe.” Later usages referred to it as the “St. Croix Trail” or “Bayfield Trail,” among others. The primary destination was LaPointe on Madeline Island and this “Grand Footpath” would lead to the development of the townsite of Gordon we now know, making it the oldest European settlement of the “interior” of NW Wisconsin (off of Lake Superior).

As more European settlement came into the region, lumberman’s roads and trails crept up the St. Croix Valley, connecting into this native footpath, thereby creating a continual route from settlements such as St. Paul & Fort Snelling to Madeline Island and Lake Superior. This eventually became the first modern road in Northern Wisconsin and Moccasin Avenue, Gordon’s “Main Street,” is a segment of that early route. This route became an official United States Postal route in 1843, “U.S. Postal Route 4444, From the Falls of St. Croix to LaPointe on Madeline Island,” which predates Wisconsin Statehood.

After the founding of Bayfield, this route was improved to accommodate wagon travel in 1857, and eventually stage coach use in 1859. Bayfield had been founded by a very powerful United States Senator from Minnesota, Henry Rice, who improved upon the route even further to promote his new development by connecting it to St. Paul and the Lower St. Croix Valley. In doing so, Rice created stopping places along the way, typically at waterpoint crossings. The location at the crossing of the Eau Claire River was of particular importance, being the point of entry or departure from the St. Croix Valley (depending on direction traveling) and also because it was known that railroads were planned to come through the area, although not yet built. With intention to operate a stopping place on this route, likely in coordination with Henry Rice, Antoine and Sarah Gordon first settled at this location in 1858, although this place and the Trail to LaPointe would have been well known to them well before that time. It was a logical relay point between Chequamegon Bay and the Lower St. Croix Valley. Prior to settling at the locale that is now Gordon, Antoine and Sarah had lived at Chequamegon Bay, first at LaPointe

on Madeline Island and later at the present site of Memorial Park in Washburn. Antoine and Sarah Gordon were both Metis, people of mixed ancestry during the fur trade era, being the children of fur trade employed fathers and Ojibwe mothers. Antoine was born at Sandy Lake Minnesota in 1812 to a French father, Jean Baptiste Gaudin (later Anglicized to "Gordon") and Owa-ne-shan (meaning Young Beaver). Sarah Gordon was born at the mouth of the Yellow River and was the daughter of English fur trader Daniel Dingley and Isabella LaPrairie, or Mush-ko-dence, (Prairie Woman), of mixed Ojibwe and French Ancestry. Isabella's father, Joseph LaPrairie, was also a prominent fur trader whose post is now today's reconstructed Forts Folle Avoine.

Antoine and Sarah Gordon came to this location to "start over" after the financial setback of the sinking of the ship Algonquin, the first commercial ship of importance on Lake Superior. The Gordons owned the Algonquin in partnership with Vincent Roy, another prominent Metis figure of LaPointe, and later Superior. Antoine and Sarah Gordon gave their settlement the name of "Amick," which was Ojibwe for "Beaver." The Gordons were involved in a number of commercial ventures including operating a stopping place, trading post, farm, commercial trout ponds, post office, and performed mail carrying, as well as guiding. The Amick Post Office was established September 12, 1860 and this date has become looked to as the traditional founding date of the community, as Gordon pre-existed the formalization of "towns" as political entities in Douglas County. Gordon celebrated its Centennial in 1960.

Antoine Gordon was widely known for his deep Catholicism and while at La Pointe had been an interpreter and choir master for the missionary Father Baraga, as well as assisted in the construction of Baraga's mission at LaPointe. At Amick, Antoine immediately established the Wa-ik-kamig Catholic Mission, which later became today's St. Anthony's Catholic Church. This mission drew its name from the Ojibwe word for "clear water," which was also the name of the Eau Claire River (French for "Clear Water"), named for its exceptional water clarity. Antoine Gordon was widely known for his benevolence and civic minded deeds, including petitioning for the first school at Amick in 1878, forgiving of debts at his trading post, transporting residents of Amick to Superior so they could register to vote in Douglas County elections, and personally buying small pox vaccine and vaccinating all of the Ojibwe people of the Upper St. Croix. It is said that Ojibwe people traveled long distances to Amick just to seek Antoine's guidance. In 1862, during the tensions of the Dakota conflict in western Minnesota, Antoine Gordon's cousin, Bagone-giizhig (Hole-in-the-Day), was deliberating whether or not to lead his Ojibwe band into the conflict. Upon hearing

of this, Antoine made his famous ride from Amick to Crow Wing in astonishing time to dissuade his cousin from doing so, thereby saving many lives on both sides of the conflict.

When the Omaha railroad came through in 1882 the station was named "Gordon" (said to have been to Antoine's objection) and the settlement thus began to be known as "Gordon's Station." The usage eventually simplified to just "Gordon." The coming of the railroad resulted in the demise of the old Trail to LaPointe and the community reoriented away from Chequamegon Bay and towards Stillwater and the burgeoning lumber industry that was about to boom in Gordon's locale. Gordon's location was significant to the lumbermen as the log drives coming down from Lake St. Croix in one direction met the logs coming down from the Eau Claire Lakes in the other, and these collected in what is now the Gordon Flowage. A dam was constructed to create a reservoir for log storage as well as water retention to release and push the logs to Stillwater. The renowned Great Lakes ship builder Alexander McDougall built a steamboat named "the City of Gordon" to tow the logs across the flowage. Having a railroad stop at this strategic point, the Musser-Sauntry Logging Company of Stillwater made Gordon its headquarters of upper river operations. Lumberjacks and supplies could arrive to Gordon by rail and from this point distribute to the outlying camps. The timber districts were not within the sand barrens themselves but rather off the edges of the them, predominantly in the Moose River, Tamarack River, and Ounce-Totogatic River regions, yet just as they were once ideal for stage coach travel, the sand barrens allowed for ease of tote roads to reach these outlying areas.

Although lumbermen had for a long time been traveling through the community or temporarily lodging in nearby camps, in regards to permanent residents, Amick had remained a uniquely Ojibwe and Metis community from the arrival of Antoine in 1858 until when the first families of European descent established permanent residency in 1888, a period of thirty years. Large numbers of permanent European settlers then came to Gordon, predominantly from Stillwater, making Gordon nearly an extension of that community. A Stillwater newspaper column once printed, "A stranger from Stillwater arriving in Gordon thinking that he knows no one in this place would soon find out that they have made a pleasant mistake, for Gordon could properly be called an off-shoot of Stillwater, and one does not have to walk very far from the depot before being assured of this fact." The legacy of Gordon's renowned Fourth of July celebrations have their origin in the lumber era as the community set off fireworks on that date to celebrate the completion of the last of the log drive

down the St. Croix for the season. The final log drive went down the St. Croix in 1912.

Nearing the end of the lumber era, a fledgling state highway was constructed through Gordon, the Wisconsin Central State Road, or "Old Hwy 11," which would become the predecessor of today's U.S. Highway 53. This road, and the demise of Gordon's lumber ties to the Lower St. Croix, resulted in Gordon's third major shift in orientation - away from the Lower St. Croix and toward the communities of the new highway corridor, an orientation which exists to this day. Primarily because of the increasing demand for local roads and road maintenance by incoming settlers, and due to the Town of Gordon's significant geographic size (more than a third of Douglas County), the original Town of Gordon was divided into the modern towns of Gordon, Wascott, and Dairyland.

After the lumber boom was over, the lands were sold off relatively cheaply to homesteaders who tried to make a go of agriculture, but eventually went bust due to the sandy soils and droughts of the 1930's. The homesteads that went tax forfeit led to the public land holdings that became today's Douglas County Forest. Forest fires raged during these drought years, necessitating fire prevention, just as America was entering its golden age of conservation and depression era programs. This was a period of large civic projects for our community as the C.C.C. built the Gordon Fire Tower and Ranger Station, a State Tree Nursery was established (no longer in existence), and the Bird Sanctuary was created with its beautiful rustic clubhouse. The W.P.A. built the Gordon Dam & Park, Mooney Dam & Park, as well as the Gordon and Wascott Town Halls. With fire prevention, open barrens grew up into jack pine forests, cut overs were replanted into red pine plantations, and the pulp wood industry became commercially important. While agriculture went bust in the sands, the next opportunity looked to become the beautiful sand bottom lakes and the vast holdings of public forest lands. This was the beginning of Gordon transforming into the tourism and recreational community it is known as today.