

Mackinac Island: A Place of Significant History and Tourism

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Mackinac Island is a location of outstanding significance in the history and the advance of the American frontier prior to 1830. Fort Mackinac and other properties related to the island's role as a military outpost and fur trade depot in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the 1880's and 1890's, Mackinac changed greatly as business investment by large railroad companies bloomed. This island is the second national park in the United States, and one of the country's premier tourist destinations since the mid-nineteenth century.

Mackinac Island is located in the Straits of Mackinac, where Lake Huron meets Lake Michigan and Michigan's Upper and Lower Peninsulas are in closest proximity. The island is about three miles east of the southeastern tip of the Upper Peninsula. Just over eight miles in circumference and about three and a half square miles in area, Mackinac Island is neither the largest nor smallest island in the straits, but its dramatic height sets it apart (U.S. Geological Survey).

According to Anishinaabe-Ojibwe tradition, Mackinac Island is a sacred place populated by the first people and was home to the Great Spirit Gitchie Manitou. Mackinac Island, by virtue of its location in the center of the Great Lakes waterway, became a tribal gathering place where offerings were made to Gitchie Manitou and where tribes buried their chiefs to honor the Great Spirit. Native Americans traveling the Straits region likened the shape of the island to that of a turtle's back and named it Michilimackinac, Land of the great Turtle (Warren 2005).

Mackinac's location and rich fish population also drew French traders and Jesuit missionaries. The steamboats that were being used to transport fish and furs made it easier for visitors to come to Mackinac Island. It was still a journey and island businesses were just beginning to cater to the tourist trade. In the 1670s, the first Europeans visited Mackinac. Father Claude Dablon wished to establish a mission on Mackinac Island and encouraged Father Jacques Marquette to move his congregation to the

island. Eager to escape the dangers from the Huron and Sioux conflict, Father Marquette agreed and moved his displaced band of Huron followers to the island in 1671 (Braden 1990).

Mackinac Island has a network of roads and trails that criss-cross. Automobiles were banned from the village in 1898 and from the park in 1901; transit is generally by foot, horse, and bicycle. The major roads to the interior of the island were in place by the early 1800s, most likely to provide access to farms. In the late nineteenth century additional roads and trails were constructed for the national and state parks. Nearly all of the current roads and trails were in place by World War II. East of the fort, cottages on the East Bluff are clearly visible from the harbor. They are balanced by the Grand Hotel and West Bluff cottages that dominate the view from the southwest. Recent residential development concentrated in Harrisonville and in the Woods Golf Course vicinity is mostly screened by trees.

After the French and Indian War (1754-1763), the British moved their settlement from the mainland, what is now Mackinaw City, to Mackinac Island and constructed Fort Mackinac in 1780. Threats from American forces as well as growing unrest in the Odawa and Chippewa tribes led British Commander Patrick Sinclair to choose the more defensible location provided by the island bluffs. In order to protect their interests in the Great Lakes Fur Trade, Chippewa chiefs Kitchie Nagon, Pouanas, Koupe and Magousseihigan sold Mackinac Island to the British on May 12, 1781 during the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). The island continued as a battleground during the War of 1812 (1812-1815), which eventually confirmed American and Canadian independence from the British crown. British troops were then forced to turn Fort Mackinac over to the Americans. During the 1820's, Mackinac Island became one of the most valuable trading posts in John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company and it dominated life on the island (Black 2001).

The arrival of Mackinac Island's first tourists in the 1830's contributed to the diversification of the island's economy. At this time travelers were beginning to seek resorts that offered scenic beauty, not

just healthy water and air as was the custom earlier. The first American resorts were mineral water spas. People began to go to the shore, preferably the ocean, but to a lakeshore if no ocean was available. The Romantic Movement introduced a new appreciation for the beauty of nature and wilderness landscapes and brought the development of tourism in places like Niagara Falls and the Catskill Mountains (Aron 1999).

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As was often the case with resort hotels in this era, the Grand Hotel was built by the railroad companies to promote and augment their travel business. In the case of Mackinac Island, the Michigan Central and the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroads combined with the Detroit and Cleveland Steamship Navigation Company. The Grand Hotel opened in mid-July, 1887 (Porter 1998).

Automobiles rather than trains and steamboats became the primary way to travel to Mackinac Island, though the final stretch was still by ferry, occasionally airplane and on the island transportation was by foot, bicycle, or horse. When the Mackinac Bridge opened in 1957, it brought even more automobile tourists to the straits region. It was so much faster and easier to reach the island that day trips became popular (Porter 1981).

Today, Mackinac Island continues to be a tremendously popular tourist destination, drawing an estimated 900,000 visitors each summer. In 1960, Mackinac Island was designated a National Historic Landmark in recognition of its outstanding role in the fur trade and the defense of the frontier. The hotels and cottages that were once modern and fashionable are now historic and fashionable. History, more than ever, is a key element in its attraction.

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