

History of the St. Croix River Flowage Gordon Dam

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The Gordon St. Croix Flowage Dam is located seven miles down stream from the town of Gordon, Douglas County, in Wisconsin.

The Gordon St. Croix Dam was called Namai Kowagon "Sturgeon Fish Dam" by the former Ojibwa tribes, who were scattered along the St. Croix Valley. The town of Gordon is located at the junctions of the St. Croix River and Eau Claire "Wayakomig" Rivers. Gordon was founded by Antoine Gordon around 1860. He established a trading post there and, for several years, carried the U.S. Mail from Bayfield to St. Paul by contract.

The Gordon St. Croix Flowage Dam and Park are owned and operated by the County of Douglas. A boat landing and a 35 site campground are operated by the County Forests and Park Administration for public use and located as a part of this historic setting where, for hundreds of years, Native Americans lived, as the Ojibwa gradually occupied more and more of the west as they displaced their fierce enemies, the Dakota-Sioux and the Fox.

In those years, the area of the upper St. Croix River was overrun with Moose, Elk, Bear, Deer, and Buffalo. They are said to have also ranged on the barrens, which formally surround the headwaters of the St. Croix River around the Gordon, Wascott areas. In fact, the Indian name for Ox Creek, located between Gordon and St. Croix, is Pe-zhe-ke (Buffalo) or Pijiki simi (Buffalo River). Every stream which emptied into the St. Croix abound in Beaver, Otter, and Muskrat. The fish, which swam in its clear waters, could not be surpassed in quality or quantity in any other spot on earth. The diversity and variety of the trees and plant life furnished canoes, shelter, clothing, and fuel. Kettles were made from clay and pulverized stone, and specimens found gave evidence of much proficiency and ingenuity in this line of manufacture. Stone was commonly used for weapons, cooking, and in everyday use, as was copper which was also available in this area.

Nami Kowagon, or Gordon St. Croix Dam, originally showed evidence of being partly diverted or constructed by the Indians with rocks and sticks for the purpose of fishing.

The first construction by the Whites was said to have been done about 1854, about the same time as the government surveyors were making the first surveys.

In 1884, in preparation for the big log drives, the companies of Musser, Sauntry, and Tozer rebuilt with rocks and logs. This construction had five 18-foot gates known as the half moon types, which were 11 feet and 8 inches in height. The last log drive was made in 1912 and sometime after 1914, the log structure was burned. A plank board walk was roughly made to gain access by foot across the remaining rock piles.

In 1935, the WPA began construction of the present dam structure, which was completed and dedicated in an impressive ceremony the summer of 1937. Because of urgently needed repairs, the dam was completely renovated and a new larger 8 foot wide bridge constructed the entire length for access to the north side. This work was done in 1988 by the Prepakt Company of Cleveland, at a cost to county taxpayers of \$165,000.00.

Getting back to the early history of the Gordon St. Croix Flowage Dam

In the Village of Ojibwa, Chief Kabamappa was located only about one half mile upstream from the dam and on the east side of the St. Croix River, or where the river flows from the north. The location of the Village was on the heavily wooded islands which can now be plainly seen from the high “look-out” area on the south side of Curly Franks Bay.

There have been many traders and explorers who used this river route, however, those documented are Etienne-Brule’s interpreter for explorer Samuel de Champlain, who claimed to have found and explored the Boise Brule’ and St. Croix Rivers in the early 1600’s.

In 1767, 57 year old Jonathan Carver ascended the St. Croix River.

In June, 1680, DuLut and his voyagers traveled this water highway in birch bark canoes from Lake Superior to the Mississippi.

In January, 1683, DuLut traveled the St. Croix route a second time. Father Louis Hennepin documented this trip and gave the St. Croix the name of the Riviere du Tumbeau.

Contemporary maps at this time label the stream Riviere de la Madeleine. It was Nicolas Perrot, a French trader and explorer, who was the first man to officially proclaim the river as the “St. Croix” on May 8, 1689, when he claimed, for France, all of the interior of North America, including the “Riviere de Sainte Croix.” The French kept the St. Croix trading route open at least until 1760, when the French war ended and England slowly began to take possession of the French Garrisons and trading posts.

In 1832, Schoolcraft headed the first American expedition to ply the full length of the St. Croix. This expedition ascended the St. Croix and three journals were kept, telling of the Indian Village located a short distance upstream from Namai Kowagon, the present site of the Gordon St. Croix Flowage Dam and Park.

In 1837, Joseph N. Nicollet, a displaced French explorer and scientist, mapped the Mississippi Headwaters and its tributaries for the U.S Government, including the St. Croix. His notes, written in long hand French, included a very accurate and interesting history of Indian life, all of which have been translated into published books of his travels. Both Schoolcraft and Nicollet told of the flourishing Ojibwa Village presided by Chief Kabamappa, “He that sits to the side.” or as called by the whites “Wet Mouth.” Chief Kabamappa was said to be a peaceful, friendly, and respectable chief, and belonged to the A-Waus-e Totem (Great Fish Clan). Nicollet wrote that he also met Kabamappa’s son, Nodin “The Wind,” who had a band downstream near the mouth of the Snake River. Both Schoolcraft and Nicollet wrote and spoke of the extensive wild rice growing in the St. Croix Flowage from the area of the Village upstream, and of the large garden in the Village which contained potatoes, squash, pumpkins, and a scalp pole in the same field. All traces of this large Village and its cemetery have now disappeared. It should be further noted that Kabamappa was one of the Ojibwa signers for the 1837 treaty document.

The Gordon-Wascott area was also an important part of the old Indian trail system, which was heavily used by these nomadic peoples for hundreds of years. Because of the extreme change of seasons and availability of food, they often traveled overland using the shortest line between two points. The Gordon to Bayfield Road (locally called the Bayfield Road) and the St. Croix trail from Gordon to just west of Ashland, are two examples of that trail system.

Mr. Nicollet wrote that some of his party left on the overland trail so as to make an appointment at LaPoint and were already there more than two days when his party arrived on August 11, 1837, via the water route of the St. Croix, Brule and Lake Superior.

We hope your journey to the Gordon St. Croix Dam and Park will be magical to you and that you, too, can relive and retrace some of the foot steps of the natives, fur traders, and explorers who were here before us.

Presented by Loren Sloan to the Gordon-Wascott Historical Society