

A Brief History of Georgian Bay

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Georgian Bay was known by many names before its current incarnation, assigned in tribute to King George IV by early 1800s British surveyor Lieutenant Henry Bayfield.

Today we know the Bay as a unique landscape with a rich, layered history. Weathered and glaciated billion-year-old rocks, countless shipwrecks concealed in her depths, and ghost towns with lingering spirits.

You'll never forget the Bay's smooth clean rock, it's whispering pines, whimpering gulls, and sparkling cool crystal-clear waters.

Georgian Bay is separated from the rest of Lake Huron by the Bruce Peninsula to the west and Manitoulin Island to the north. Though it was decided in the 1800s that it should be part of Lake Huron, it is often referred to as the sixth Great Lake. It even acts like a Great Lake, creating its own weather, waves, and currents.

Some of Georgian Bays many names:

*" Spirit Lake ~ - Ojibway Indians
" Lake Attigouatan ~ - Huron Indians
" La Mer Douce ~ - Samuel de Champlain
" Lake Manitoulin ~ - Royal Navy Captain
William Fitzwilliam Owen
" Georgian Bay ~ - Lieutenant Henry Bayfield*

Geology

About 4.5 billion years ago, great cracks spewing molten lava and rock opened in the Earth's crust. This formed the basement bedrock known as the Precambrian Shield (See Figure 1.)The shield, part of the North American lithospheric plate, underwent three mountain building periods. The result of movement of continental plates created folds, cracks and faults. Of interest is the the Grenville Front, a major fault located at Collins Inlet in northern Georgian Bay. It separates Philip Edward Island from mainland and can be traced all the way to Greenland! (*please see "Natural History of Northern Georgian Bay" by G.M. Courtin for more info on this*) Between each mountain building period, weathering and erosion wore down the mountains, producing sedimentary material that washed into the seas.

During the Paleozoic period (600 to 225 million years ago) much of southern Ontario was flooded repeatedly by warm, shallow, coral seas leaving behind organic sediments such as shale, silt, clay, sand, and coral. The continent was much further south then.

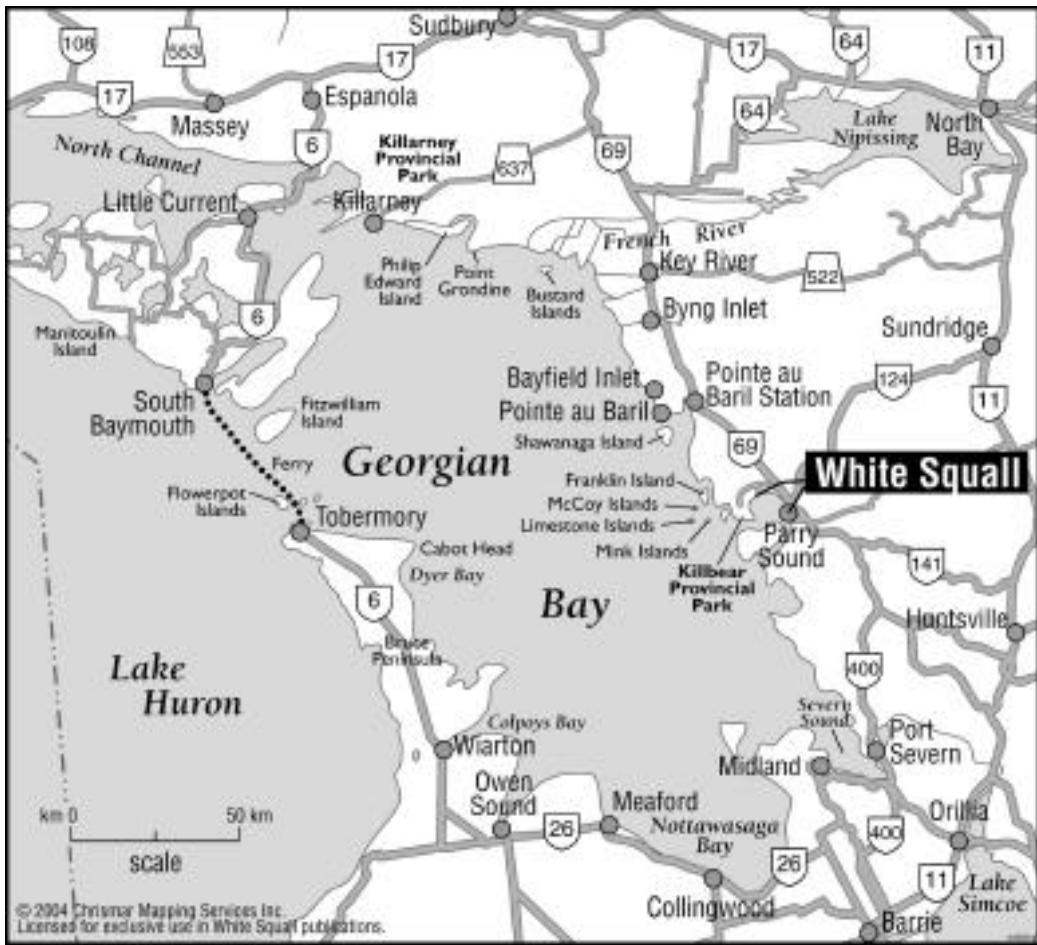


Figure 1- Precambrian Shield - Georgian Bay is on the line between shield and younger sedimentary rock of the Niagara Escarpment.

After the disappearance of the seas, the land was squeezed and folded as the continent drifted north. Extreme pressures warping the rock layers caused two things: the organic sediments laid down in the seas turned into various types of stone (shale, sandstone, limestone) and folding / cracking of the land formed massive domes and basins (see figures 2 & 3).

Much of the rock we see along the eastern shore is part of the Grenville Province (south of the Grenville Front) is composed generally of two types of rock. The first is igneous (molten) rock called orthogneiss, pink and red in colour. The second is sedimentary rock called paragneiss, alternating bands of pink and grey).

In the blink of an eye geologically speaking (23 000 to 10 000 years ago) the Arctic glacier advanced to cover what is now Canada and the northern United States. This 1 to 2 km thick ice-sheet ground, pushed, carved, and compressed the land. Popular theory suggests that the unusual landscape of the Bay was carved by the glaciers. They left behind the many islands and inlets, scouring the bedrock clean. You can see the evidence of this today along the eastern shores: the “30,000 Islands” dotted with a combination of treeless and vegetated islands of pink granite rock in shallow water.

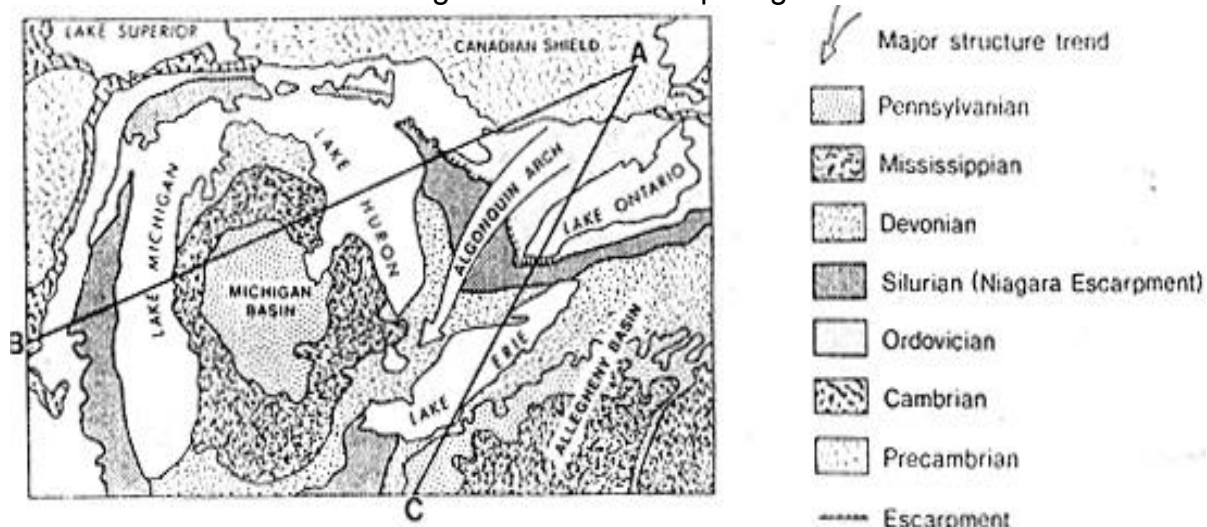


Figure 2 Overview of Algonquin Dome (ARCH) and Michigan Basin

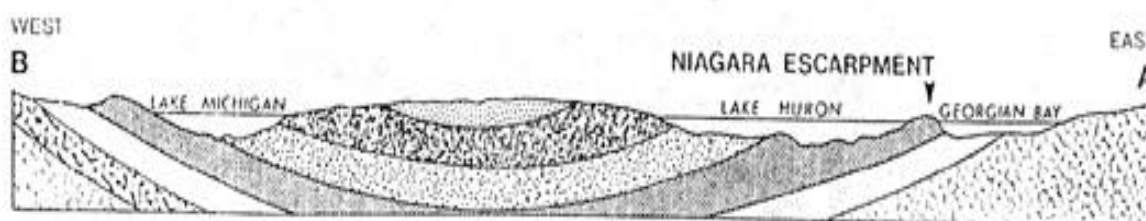


Figure 3- Michigan Basin

The western shore of the Bay , “ the Bruce Peninsula” is dramatically different. Huge limestone, dolostone, shale, and sandstone cliffs are flanked with conifers and birch. The water is deep and cold. This Peninsula, “also known as the Niagara Escarpment”

is the rim of the Michigan Basin, a massive landform containing many of the Great Lakes (*Figure 3*). The Michigan Basin is the remnant of a massive fold in Earth's crust. The base of the fold remains visible, but erosion has erased the dome or arch.

The more controversial theories say that the Great Lakes were worn into lakes by catastrophic floods and currents. The cause of the flood is still debated. Maybe flood water was suddenly released from enormous reservoirs beneath the melting glaciers? Or maybe rapid uplifting of Earth's crust pushed water in from somewhere?

Human History

Hunters and gatherers roamed the shores of the Bay as early as 9000 BC. There is evidence in Killarney that semi-nomadic Plano people set up camp around that time. Woodland Indians moved into the area around 225 BC.

Thousands of years later (around 1640) the natives in the region were divided into two language groups: Algonkian-speaking people to the north and Iroquoian-speaking to the south. The Huron's settled on the southern shores of Georgian Bay, farming and trading with other tribes.

<p><i>The Bay's First Nations Cultures</i> Woodland Indians ~ Hopewell, Peninsula, Laronde, and Copper Algonkian-speakers ~ Ojibway, Chippewa, Algonkin, and Ottawa Iroquoian-speakers ~ Iroquois, Ouendate/Huron, Tobacco/Petun, and Neutral</p>

Eager to extend their trading, the Huron's decided to do an exchange with the early French explorers. In 1610 Champlain, Governor of New France, sent Etienne Brulé to exchange places with a young Huron named Savignon.

Brulé readily adapted to the native lifestyle and became the first white man to visit the Bay, arriving via the French River.

Savignon, on the other hand, reported magical things in the modern world but ruled France a savage and brutal society.

French missionaries arrived next spreading Christianity and strengthening trade. By the mid 1600's Europeans were clambering for "exotic" beaver pelts. Soon after, "coureur de bois" (European and Indian transportation canoeists) were paddling fur-laden canoes for the trade.

It wasn't long before a canoe route connected the Great Lakes to Hudson's Bay (1662). This was the first trade route for The Hudson Bay Company, the primary exporter.

Alexander Henry arrived in 1761 and soon became one of the most successful traders on the Great Lakes. He got here like most others: via the French River during a southern gale. Henry remarked in his journal how alarmed he was by the size of the waves his companions would set out in. But he soon discovered how stable the large canoes were in rough conditions.

Henry set out traveling west passing Point aux Grondine named “grumbling point” for the constant sound of waves as they hit the shoals. The next day he arrived on an island west of Killarney. Striking a small rock against a boulder inspired him to name the place La Cloche Island (the bell island).

With three other partners, Henry’s “voyageurs” traded furs from as far away as northern Saskatchewan; forming The North West Company which soon competed with the Hudson’s Bay Company.

By the 1800s, small villages had sprouted around the many fur trade posts. As the fur trade declined, settlers turned to the huge natural resources around them for trade instead. They branched out into fishing and lumber operations, spurring the need for railroads and shipyards to transport goods.

Commercial fishing centred on lake trout and whitefish. Other species were plentiful (e.g., pickerel, pike, sturgeon, herring, and bass). The largest fishing camps were on the Bustard, Mink, Snake, and Champlain Islands. Many fishermen’s families lived on these islands from spring until freeze up.

Parry Sound is one of the few remaining lumber-era towns. It was William Beatty Jr. who bought a small mill at the mouth of the Seguin River in 1863 (where Parry Sound is today). With the success of the mill, Beatty bought up and developed the surrounding land. With thirsty workers and Beatty’s covenant prohibiting the sale liquor, it wasn’t long before a new town sprung up across the river. It was known as Parry Harbour, then Parry “Hoot “ some say because of all the “hootin”, and “hollerin” of the liquored-up lumberjacks and mill workers. The liquor flowed freely in the Hoot, once known as the rowdiest town on the Bay.

Primitive lumber camps were established along most of the Bay’s river corridors (e.g., French, Pickerel, Magnetewan, and Seguin). Trees were harvested using only axes, saws, and horse teams. The men lived in long log-houses with an open fire-pit and a hole in the roof to vent the smoke. They slept on pole bunks and ate meals of mostly bread, molasses, beans, and fat-pork. Life was meager and the work brutally hard and dangerous.

As with the fur, the supply of trees soon exhausted and the last few of the “big” fish were pulled from the Bay. Villages were abandoned as the people moved on.

Over fishing, the influx of sea lamprey, and (more recently) the proliferation of double-crested cormorant have all been blamed for the declining fish population. Today only

a handful of part-time commercial fishers remain.

Some did adapt to the changing economy and environment by the turn of the century. They built resorts and ran steamships to transport guests of the grand hotels that sprang up along the Bay. Many little vessels operated during the 1870's to carry cottagers and round-trip passengers to the area now known as the "30,000 Islands".

By the early 1900's the new age of tourism arrived in the Great Lakes. Life for these summer migrants was unhurried and simple: sketching, painting, fishing, canoeing, sailing, and swimming. They socialized over a cup of tea or a game of cards at each others camp, cottage, hotel, or private club. Many of today's Georgian Bay towns still rely primarily on the vacation industry with the many vacationers enjoying the same pleasures for the past 100 years.

For a while in the 1950s there was renewed shipping in Georgian Bay ports:

- coal - Little Current, Midland, Owen Sound*
- iron - Depot Harbour*
- petroleum - Parry Sound, Britt*

As most commercial ports sit idle today, people still flock to the shores of Georgian Bay. Whether in crowds at Wasaga Beach or in the solitude of the windswept 30,000 Islands by sailboat, kayak, or canoe, the Bay is an experience they never forget.

Resources

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Cool Bay Facts:

Michigan Basin - to give you an idea of depth of the "Michigan Basin", sedimentary rock layers buried under almost 2 miles of rock in central Michigan are exposed at the Shield boundary in central Ontario.

Red Rock Lighthouse was rebuilt three times over the years and deceased lighthouse keeper Adam Brown is still local legend for tending the lonely rock for over 40 years. His name can be still seen today carved into the hard granite stone - well they had lots of time!!

The Ghost of Big McCoy Island - local legend has it that on a full moon evening each September, a mournful scream can be heard from the deepest part of Big McCoy. Why does this island continue to be haunted? (read all about it in *Ghosts of the Bay*)

Turtle Rock in Shawanaga Bay - offerings of tobacco, food and beads are left by travelers even today to ensure calm weather - a tradition started by an Ojibway boy caught in a storm, seeing a giant turtle he prayed to it for calm weather. With the passing of the storm, the boy turned to thank the turtle but instead was greeted with a smooth rock instead; the boy then left an offering of meat as thanks.

Key Harbour - an important port in 1900's - upon discovery of a huge iron mine near Sudbury , Key Harbour was developed as it was the closest deep water harbour to export the iron ore. A long dock, railway tracks, buildings all used to stand at its entrance. Little evidence is left today besides some dock pilings and a few summer cottages.

Dead Island - Ojibway on the mainland brought their dead wrapped with some of their belongings and placed high up in trees or under heavy piles of rocks on the island. In the late 1800's this native burial ground was robbed of its Indian burial artifacts, including its mummified remains and shipped to Chicago for display at the 1893 Worlds Columbia Exposition. Presently local First Nations are negotiating with the Chicago museum to send back what few artifacts are still in their possession.

Bustard Islands - The Bustard islands got their name from the slow-moving game bird of northwestern Europe - these birds like to gather on isolated islands in large flocks. From 1880 to 1930, a substantial summer fishing community was established on these grouping of rocks and islands.

French River Ghost Town - once upon a time some 400 to 1400 people lived in the French River Village which had amongst its rows of houses two churches, two mills, a hotel, schools and many more buildings.

The Sound (of Parry Sound) - is one of the few deep fresh water areas in the Great Lakes to have successfully seen the reintroduction of a healthy population of lake trout. Also why is the Sound so deep when the rest of the eastern coast of the Bay so shallow? A bit of a mysterious anomaly.

Depot Harbour (Parry Island) - once was a thriving port connected by railway (the Booth line) that ran all the way to Ottawa - before a school was built, Depot harbour children rode the train back and forth to the town of Burks Falls each day for school.