Where the Waters Divide: Indigenous Landscapes and Identities in the St. Clair Delta

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As borderlands go, the delta of the St Clair River is as much an idea as it is a reality.

True, the political boundary between the United States and Canada, between Ontario and Michigan, runs somewhere through it. But it is an imaginary line that one can easily see across to the other side, unlike the lines bisecting the Great Lakes themselves. Almost as easily, one can move from one side to the other, in something as simple and unassuming as a canoe or kayak, as I have done on occasion. Unlike political boundaries on land, there are no man-made physical markers: no fences, walls, or even signs. Along with two other locales—the Saint Mary’s River linking Lakes Superior and Huron; and the Niagara, between Lakes Erie and Ontario—the Strait between Lakes Huron and Erie is a zone of geographic and hydrologic transitions. Two great land masses—the lower peninsula of Michigan and that of southwest Ontario—almost touch. Two enormous bodies of water are linked by a passage that is slender and well-defined along most of its 80-mile length. Aside from a handful of islands, one is either on this or that side of the Detroit River or the St. Clair River. The great exception is the delta where the St. Clair River fans out at the head of Lake St. Clair: 135 square miles of multiple, winding channels and many dozens of islands large and small. It is first and foremost a place of ambiguity. Land and water do not so much meet as interpenetrate, as river and transition almost imperceptibly to reed bed and marsh. “Dry land” is often seasonal, as water levels rise and fall, and currents shift sandbars here and there.

In this transitional environment, the life that flourishes, both flora and fauna, is adapted to this range of conditions. And so must it be with the human presence. What is remarkable, and worthy of our study and understanding, is that despite over three centuries of incursion by nonindigenous cultures, an indigenous presence not only persists but thrives. Surrounded by the political, economic, cultural and environmental realities of the developed world in the early 21st
century, a viable First Nations presence, and moreover the landscape upon which its identity
depends, persist in this place, called in Anishinaabemowin Bkejwanong, “where the waters
divide.” This is a story about the relationships that develop between places and the groups of
people that inhabit them. It is about the way peoples find the balance between what they value
and what the land affords them, and in doing so create their unique place in the world, their
cultural landscape. In the case of the St. Clair delta, we see a maritime cultural landscape; that is,
one characterized by an intimate connection between a people and water—as a source of
subsistence, a means of transportation, and mark of identity.

**Early Habitation in the St. Clair Delta**

It is a commonplace observation in maritime studies that water can serve either as a
bridge or a barrier, depending on a given culture’s technology, practices, and values.¹
Archaeological evidence suggests that indigenous peoples living between Lake Huron and Lake
Erie were active on both sides of the Strait in the centuries that preceded contact, beginning in
the late first millennium CE. Whether it was a flow of peoples, goods, or styles is not clear, but
characteristic “Wayne ware” appears at the Rivière au Vase site near Lake St. Clair’s Anchor
Bay, near Chatham on the Ontario side, at Springwells below Detroit, and at Gibraltar at the
mouth of the Detroit River.² An intriguing possibility is raised by the similarity of artifact

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assemblages at the Rivière au Vase and Gibraltar sites. Both sites feature a burial where the grave goods include a copper awl and several chert drills: precisely the sort of items one would expect in a canoe-builder’s toolkit. Considering the proximity of Gibraltar to the birch bark resources on the island of Bois Blanc (“white wood,” or birch), it is entirely possible that a truly maritime culture had occupied the Straits a millennium before the arrival of the French.

By the outset of the period of European contact, the picture becomes clearer, yet far more complex. The Straits area was known to be highly dynamic, as rival indigenous groups contested control of the fur trade: both the beaver themselves, and the water routes that the pelts and trade goods traveled. Definitely not a barrier, and more than a bridge, the Straits was a logistical and strategic nexus, a crossroads along a maritime highway that penetrated the North American continent from the Atlantic to the farthest navigable reaches of the Lake Superior basin at the edge of the Great Plains, with portages into the Mississippi drainage.

**War and Depopulation**

The earliest French maps of the Great Lakes region date from the early 1640s, at a time when the Beaver Wars precipitated large-scale shifts on the population. Although the French headquartered their fur trade in present-day Quebec, the supply of beaver had quickly dwindled there. Moreover, European-introduced diseases such as smallpox, measles and pneumonia had ravaged those peoples with whom they had come in contact. Iroquois raiders from the Lake Ontario area, intent on gaining control of the lands and trade to their west, relentlessly attacked their Huron neighbors, effectively destroying them as a nation in their Georgian Bay homeland.

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of Huronia. Pressing on, the Iroquois waged war against the nations occupying southwest Ontario and the lower peninsula of Michigan. These included the Mascouten, Fox, Sauk and Potawatomi, who fled across Lake Michigan to Green Bay, where the Iroquois offensive lost momentum. The result was a depopulated landscape that had only recently been a killing ground. The names on the early maps drawn by missionaries and explorers, together with linguistic, ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence, allows us to visualize how differing groups disposed themselves on the landscape in the years preceding the arrival of the French as colonists. Clues to group identity may take the form of subsistence and settlement patterns, group names and other linguistic evidence. Sources of this information during this period come chiefly from cartographic and first-person narrative documents.

A recurring theme in this process of linking peoples, places and practices, is that of fire. An anonymous map entitled Novvelle France, attributed to Jean Bourdon and dated no later than 1642, shows the locations of Great Lakes tribes “prior to the dispersals of the late 1640s and the 1650s.” A large area west of Lake Erie is labeled as the territory of the Gens de Feu (“people of the fire”), while one of several smaller labels identifies the aictaeronon. Citing Bourdon’s imperfect knowledge of Huron, Steckley interprets this as a variant of atsistaeronon; again, “people of the fire,” the Huron name for the Mascouten nation. The other labels give the Huron names for the Potawatomi, Fox and Sauk nations. This clustering of several groups around the general term “people of the fire,” corresponds to the summation of ethnohistorian Charles Cleland. “After many years of discussion and speculation,” he states, “most scholars seem to agree that the ‘Fire Nation’ was not a single group but included a large number of small,

7. Ibid., 21.
independent Algonquian-speaking *swidden* agriculturalists who occupied the southern third of what is now the Lower Peninsula of Michigan,” and included the Potawatomi and Mascouten.\(^8\) The latter were decidedly not a maritime people; rather, they were semi-sedentary horticulturalists, and “as late as 1712 they were said not to use canoes.”\(^9\)

It should be noted that the term “swidden” as used here may be misleading, implying in current usage a slash-and-burn style of agriculture where fields are depleted in a few seasons, and the cycle recommenced elsewhere. Early North American accounts, including from Huronia, suggest that after clearing the land, the inhabitants regularly burned only the weeds; moreover, by planting the complementary “three sisters”—corn, beans, and squash—nutrients were not rapidly depleted from the soil.\(^10\) Also misleading are the interpretations of the name “Mascouten,” which was initially construed as “fire people,” while the more accurate meaning is “people of the small prairies.” The former interpretation may not be as erroneous as it first appears, however: James Fitting notes that the Algonquian-speaking Chippewa (Ojibwe) in a treaty of 1819 used the place-name “Muscutawaingh,” meaning “open prairie burnt over,” to refer to where the modern city of Flint now stands.\(^11\)

The first French eyewitness account of the depopulated landscape left behind by the Huron and the Fire Nations comes from René Brehan de Galinée, one of a pair of Sulpician missionaries who in 1669 journeyed from Montreal to an Odawa settlement at Sault Ste.-Marie.

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by way of the Strait of Detroit. His observations indicate an awareness that they were traversing a depopulated landscape, but not that it was also an anthropogenic one. Of their winter camp on the north shore of Lake Erie, the priest wrote: “although it has no cultivation it does not fail to produce grapes in great quantities as large and as sweet as the finest of France,” and “the woods are open, interspersed with beautiful meadows.”

Yet on his accompanying map, he noted only a few miles inland from that same place, “here was once the Neutral nation.” Paddling up the Straits, the party encountered a large Iroquois encampment at Springwells, an ancient habitation site featuring several large mounds, just below the later site of Detroit. There, a painted idol marked their maritime war path, as sacrifices of food and pelts to “this god of stone” were said to ensure the Iroquois raiding parties safe passage across Lake Erie.

Upstream, they encountered the so-called Lac des Eaux de Mer or “Lake of Sea-water,” (Lake St. Clair), as it had been termed since the time of Champlain in 1616, possibly based on indigenous informants referring to a salt spring among its tributaries (today, the Salt River enters Anchor Bay near New Baltimore). The missionaries did not display the interest in sea water that would be expected of an explorer in search of the Orient: witness Nicolet traveling with an ornate Chinese robe in anticipation of his meeting with the Great Khan. In fact, Galinée’s party found neither salt water nor inhabitants.

13. Galinée, 204.
16. Galinée, 204.
This perception is corroborated by Louis Hennepin, the Jesuit who accompanied Sieur de la Salle on his ill-fated *Griffon* expedition from Niagara to Green Bay. Crossing the little lake in 1679 on the feast of St. Clare [sic], they gave it its modern name, Hennepin noting the difficulties of sailing a European-style ship through the delta: “There is little depth as you enter and leave Lake St. Clare, especially as you leave it. The discharge from Lake Orleans [Huron] divides at this place into several small channels, almost all barred by sandbanks. We were obliged to sound them all, and at last discovered a very fine one. Our bark was detained here several days by head winds.”17 Along the St. Clair River, Hennepin described a landscape that was clearly both anthropogenic and depopulated: “The Banks of the Strait are vast Meadows and the Prospect is terminated with some Hills covered with vineyards, Trees bearing good Fruit, Groves, and Forests, so well dispos’d that one would think Nature alone could not have made, without the Help of Art, so charming a Prospect.”18 As with Galinée’s winter camp on Lake Erie a decade previous, paradisiacal bounty is viewed as a gift of Providence, or a beneficent Nature. Ernest Lajeunesse observes, “Hennepin has left a promised-land description of the strait, wherein there is no mention of the presence of any inhabitants, red or white.”19 The former inhabitants, of course, had only recently put two Michigans—the lower peninsula and the lake—between themselves and their mortal enemies, but would have to wait two decades before regaining their ancestral homelands.

Repopulation of the Straits

When the Mascouten, Sauk, Fox and Potawatomi fled the southern Lower Peninsula in the 1640s, they left behind not only their semi-sedentary settlement pattern but probably their horticultural subsistence pattern as well. That they took refuge at Green Bay, with its significantly shorter growing season, speaks volumes about the ferocity of the Iroquois onslaught. It appears that they were able to subsist by supplementing their crops with hunting and fur-trapping, along with the trade goods and supplies that the latter brought. The French trading outpost was at the Straits of Mackinac, accessible to the peoples of northern Lakes Michigan and Huron. When in 1701 Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, commandant at Michilimackinac, declared his intention to move his headquarters south to the Huron-Erie strait, it precipitated a homecoming for some, but a dislocation for others, in ways that can be perceived in the cultural landscape of the Straits during the French colonial period.

The standard narrative of the “founding” of Detroit places the credit squarely with Cadillac, who “invited” the native trading partners from his tenure as commandant at Michilimackinac to join him at the new headquarters of the fur trade. These included Huron and Odawa residing in the St. Ignace area, as well as recent refugees from Green Bay: Fox, Sauk and Potawatomi. It would also have extended to long-term Anishinaabeg residents to the east: including the Mississauga on the mainland north of Lake Huron, and Odawa on Manitoulin Island. From the standpoint of the Green Bay groups, the narrative might have been rather different; in effect, they were using the French against their inveterate Iroquois enemies, to

regain their recently vacated homelands. The pattern these groups formed relative to Cadillac’s Fort Ponchartrain gives credence to this notion. The Huron and Potawatomi villages were closest both to the fort, and to the culturally significant Springwells area, site of numerous burial mounds. Considering that these two groups were returning to their ancestral lands, it is not difficult to reframe the relationship between them and the French, where they were in effect inviting the French to join them as allies in reclaiming their native territory and standing as a bulwark against the common enemy, the Iroquois.

**Home Away from Homeland**

Significantly, the Odawa established their villages on the other side of the Detroit River, where Sandwich and Windsor Ontario now stand. Not being native to this region, and having relocated many miles south from Manitoulin Island, they may have found it politic to keep their distance as newcomers. Considering the reception the Fox and Mesquakie received when they attempted in 1711 to join the return to the Straits, the Odawa acted wisely: the “Fox Wars,” fought by the Potawatomi and Huron with French aid, drove the interlopers back to Wisconsin.¹⁹

Having come the farthest from their home, the Mississauga settled themselves the farthest from Fort Ponchartrain. Galinée’s map of 1670 shows the “Mississaugué” along the north Lake Huron shore, while that of Boishébert in 1731 shows “Les Misissagi” dwelling in the St. Clair delta, on the eastern shore of “Île de Nénehe,” present-day Harsens Island (Figure 1). It appears that these hunter-fisher-gatherers from the north, the Mississauga, whose name means “river with many outlets,” chose the delta of the St. Clair River as a place that suited their traditional patterns

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of settlement and subsistence; a place that felt like home. There they found their customary seasonal resources in abundance: fish, game and wildfowl. They also found the birch and spruce trees used to make their canoes. With these supremely adapted watercraft, they were a true maritime culture, capable of navigating open waters, penetrating shallow estuaries, and harvesting wild rice (*zizania aquatica*, “manoomin” in Anishinaabemowin) (Figure 2). The delta offered an expansive and varied landscape through which they moved seasonally, from fishing camps during spring spawning, to summer garden plots and reed beds, to wooded hunting grounds and sugar maple groves in winter.\textsuperscript{22} The Mississauga could barter for corn and vegetables with their old neighbors from the north, the Odawa (“traders” in Anishinaabemowin) much as they had done on Manitoulin Island.\textsuperscript{23} Pelts and hides were exchanged for trade goods from the French at Fort Ponchartrain.\textsuperscript{24}

Throughout the French colonial period, the Mississauga, gradually joined by related Anishinaabeg Ojibwe and Saulteurs from the north, were an acknowledged presence in the St. Clair delta, appearing in censuses taken in 1718 and 1736.\textsuperscript{25} They were represented as routinely

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  \item Tanner, *Atlas*, 61.
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offering hospitality to travelers, as in the case of Pierre de Charlevoix during a stormy passage in 1721 from Detroit to Michilimackinac.²⁶

With the arrival of the British regime in 1760, promptly followed by Pontiac’s uprising in 1763, the indigenous population of the St. Clair delta, now collectively termed “Chippewa” (a variant of Ojibwe), became increasingly peripheral to the colonial economy and its maritime culture. Unlike the French adoption of indigenous watercraft in the upper Great Lakes, British-style navigation emphasized traditional shipping. An armed schooner, the Gladwin, was stationed at a small fortified base up the St. Clair River at the present site of the town of St. Clair, whereupon the St. Clair Flats became a mere obstacle to shipping between Detroit and Michilimackinac.

**Emergence of the Walpole Island Community**

These simultaneous processes of indigenous accretion of related Anishinaabeg groups and their marginalization by the Euro-Americans, were accelerated by the War of 1812. Following the Treaty of Ghent (1814) and the work of the International Boundary Commission (1817-1820), the St. Clair Flats was divided between the United States and Canada along the course of the South Channel, dividing the Chippewa homeland between Michigan and Ontario. On the Ontario side, Odawa were forced by the Crown to cede their villages near the strategic Detroit area, both on the mainland and on several islands.²⁷ Across the river, Michigan’s governor Lewis Cass questioned in 1827 whether “a few naked wandering barbarians should stay the march of civilization and improvement, and hold in a state of perpetual unproductiveness,

immense regions formed by Providence to support millions of human beings?" Pressured by both the Canadian and United States governments, groups displaced by land cessions were forced to decide between removal or refuge. On the American side, the official policy of land cessions was the prelude to removal to the West throughout the 1830s. Among the Potawatomi in particular, resistance often took the form of joining their Anishinaabeg relations on Walpole Island. The Canadian government, too, pursued a policy of land cessions. Despite a concerted official effort to remove aboriginal communities in southwest Ontario to Manitoulin Island, however, Walpole Island remained unceded.

With a diverse indigenous population composed of multiple tribal affiliations, subsistence and settlement patterns, and numerous non-indigenous squatters, the island only gradually began to take on the attributes of a homeland to all Three Fires of the Anishinaabeg. Fortunately, the diversity and expanse of the landscape matched that of the inhabitants: arable land, woods, marshland and waters to support a semi-sedentary pattern of horticultural subsistence, with a substantial amount of traditional hunting and fishing. By 1852, Neal Ferris notes, “most of the Walpole Island community was still characterized as being away from the reserve a good six months of the year;” a decade later, a quarter of Walpole Island households were not engaged in agriculture at all, and a third only marginally.

Ideologically and politically as well, the emergent Walpole Island community forged its identity in its relations with the institutions of the dominant culture. In 1844, a pair of Jesuit

priests, unannounced, erected a mission on the sacred Highbanks ground, cutting down an oak
grove in the process. Challenged to a debate by Oshawana, an ancient Shawnee and comrade-in-
arms of Tecumseh, and the Chippewa chief Petrokeshig, the clerics were unable to convince their
would-be converts of the superiority of their religion. Within a few years, the mission
mysteriously burned, and the priests gave up their efforts. An Ojibwe commented that though the
chapel might be rebuilt from brick and stone, it would burn again. Today the Tecumseh
memorial stands on the site. 31 Politically as well, solidarity emerged. In 1869, a coalition of the
Three Fires petitioned the Governor General, Sir John Young, as the “Chippeway, Pottawatomy
and Ottawa Indians of Walpole Island,” asserting their claims to their ancestral homelands along
the Detroit River and western Lake Erie. 32 Although unsuccessful in regaining their ceded
territory, the action demonstrated that the Three Fires nations could act collectively while
maintaining tribal identity.

Conclusions

It lies outside the scope of this discussion to describe in detail the prolonged and complex
processes by which the Walpole Island community has negotiated its relationship with the rest of
the world. With remarkable sustained effort, the Walpole Island First Nations have both engaged
with, and remained distinct from, the American and Canadian cultures, whether it be politics,
commercial agriculture, industry, tourism. The community-based research arm of the Walpole
Island Band Council, known as Nin.Da.Waab.Jig (“those who seek to find”), has made its
mission the preservation and understanding of their heritage: oral and archival history, language,

31. Denys Delâge, Helen Hornbeck Tanner and Pierre Chazelle, “The Ojibwa-Jesuit Debate at Walpole Island,
32. Anonymous, Memorial.
foodways, music and dance, arts and crafts. As a result, today’s Walpole Islanders are performing, and communicating their identity in a 21st-century indigenous landscape—a term that once might have been regarded as an oxymoron.

Archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence make it clear that indigenous peoples have pursued a maritime culture, and created a maritime landscape, for well over a millennium in the Straits between Lake Huron and Lake Erie. The intimate relation with water and waterborne transportation was a common element of groups who subsisted as horticulturalists, hunter-fisher-gatherers, and traders, who lived in semi-sedentary settlements or in seasonal camps. These peoples shaped their landscape with fire and water, creating spaces for crops, game, fish, and wild rice. Even before their arrival, Europeans had disrupted this balance, so that their perceptions were distorted by the appearance of abundance without human agency. As the Straits was repopulated, the delta of the St. Clair River became a landscape reminiscent of the homeland that the northern Mississauga and Ojibwe had left behind. These peoples of “the place where waters divide” soon found themselves in a place where nations divide as well. Ironically, its very liminality created a cultural and political niche. Walpole Island was only a short paddle away from two nation-states, both simultaneously pursuing a policy of removal or forced assimilation. That the Three Fires of the Anishinaabeg, each with its own identity and traditions, managed to forge a community based on common needs, values and goals, bespeaks a place where the waters may divide, but the land and people come together.
Figure 1. Map of Detroit, copy after Boishébert, 1731. (A) Fort Ponchartrain; (B) “Les Misissagi” on “Ile de Nénehe” (Harsens Island); (C) Potawatomi and Huron (Wyandot); (D) Odawa. (Image: Archives Canada).
Figure 2. “Gathering Wild Rice,” painting by Seth Eastman (ca 1853). (Image: The American Aboriginal Portfolio, by Mary H. Eastman).
Figure 3. Monument to Tecumseh on Walpole Island, dedication ceremony October 5, 2015. Sculpture by Toulouse Bebamikawe (Image: Anishinabek News)
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