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Before the Benedictines: The Peoples Here First

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The Peoples
Here Before
the Benedictines

1874 Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota – Stearns County, p. 155
http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/ref/collection/mhs/id/1020
Relatively little is documented in the SJU or CSB Archives about the people here before the Benedictines, the Native Americans.
One source of information, in the Abbey Archives

*Natural History of Colgateville, Minnesota*
*The entire work is online.*

From the Abbey Archives.
“Peculiar beauty is given to our woods by the white birch, which...was an important tree in the early days... The outer bark... may be taken off in horizontal rings, cut into shape and was used for making canoes by the Indians.”

“The sheets of birch bark... were sewed together with watab, a “thread” made of thin pine roots, and the seams covered with pitch to make the canoe watertight. The rower did not sit, but knelt in the bottom of the craft and rowed with only one paddle.”

“On the trunk of the birch grew a large fungus, called punk or spunk and used as tinder (sagatagan) by the Indians.”

From the Abbey Archives.
Text from Hoffmann’s *Natural History of Collegeville*, p. 24-25
Canoe sketch from Hoffmann’s *Natural History of Collegeville*, p. 24
“About 1878, some Indians from the White Earth reservation would still come down this way in the Spring to hunt, fish – and ... also to sell moccasins adorned with bead work. The company or family had with them a canoe about 15 ft. long, which was strapped upon the woman’s back on the march.”

“Birch bark was much sought for us as kindling material in default of wood or paper.”

From the Abbey Archives.

Text from Hoffmann’s *Natural History of Collegeville*, p. 24-25

Canoe sketch from Hoffmann’s *Natural History of Collegeville*, p. 24
“In Collegeville Township, the largest [lake] is our lake, I believe. It was, by the witness of early maps, first called St. Louis Lake; later, St. John’s Lake; and recently – since 1896 – Sagatagan.”

1874 Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota – Stearns County, p. 155
http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/ref/collection/mhs/id/1020
Text from Hoffmann’s Natural History of Collegeville, p. 14
“The name covering the whole lake was St. Louis Lake or St. John’s Lake. It had no name before our Fathers found it. They called it St. Louis Lake in honor of King Louis of Bavaria, a benefactor of the American missions; the Abbey was called St. Louis on the Lake.”

1874 Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota – Stearns County, p. 155
http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/ref/collection/mhs/id/1020
Text from Hoffmann’s Natural History of Collegeville, p. 14
Hoffmann published a “Song of Hiawatha”-like poem in the June 1896 issue of the St. John’s Record. In “Vision of the Island,” he revived the lake’s Indian name, which [he said] is Sagatagan – accented on the tag, and all the a’s pronounced like the a in “all”....(or, like the a’s in “Hiawatha”!)
Hoffmann mentions the local lakes’ names as given in the 1874 atlas...

“The map of 1874 shows only St. Louis Lake and Cedar Lake – now Big Fish Lake. Big Watab Lake is indicated but not named.”

- Hoffmann, p. 12

1874 Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota – Stearns County, p. 155
http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/ref/collection/mhs/id/1020
Text from Hoffmann’s Natural History of Collegeville, p. 12
“I am inclined to think that Sagatagan was a name for a group of lakes near which the Indians gathered punk or spunk. Hence Spunk Lakes at Avon. They were named for an old (minor) chief called Spunk and known to early settlers. In Indian his name was Sagatagan. Our lake plausibly forms part of the group.”

- Hoffmann, p. 14

1874 Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota –Stearns County, p. 155
http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/ref/collection/mhs/id/1020
Text from Hoffmann’s Natural History of Collegeville, p. 14
Abbot Peter Engel’s diary lends some credence to Hoffmann’s theory that the lake was named after an Indian named “Sagatagan”:

Another story comes from the Diary of Abbot Peter Engel. We read under 16 July 1920: "Today 'John Smith' the oldest Chippewa Indian living (they say he is 130 years and his wrinkled face indicates it) was here on a short visit. He used to be around here before St John’s was thought of. He said that our lake was called 'Sagatagan' not because there was a greater amount of punk-Sagatagan found around it but because an Indian by the name of Sagatagan was buried on its south shore."\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{4} Peter Engel, Diary: 1916-1920, SJAA.

Chronology

1846: Boniface Wimmer leaves Metten, Germany and goes to Pennsylvania
1854: Peter Loso arrives in what would later become St. Joseph

1855: The Indians cede their land in this vicinity to the United States
1855: The Indians cede their land in this vicinity to the United States
1856: The settlers in St. Joseph build a log church
1856: The settlers in St. Joseph build a log church
1857: The sisters arrive in St. Cloud
1857: The sisters arrive in St. Cloud
1858: The monks leave Pennsylvania; arrive in St. Cloud
1858: The monks leave Pennsylvania; arrive in St. Cloud
1859: The monks move to St. Joseph because of St. Cloud land litigation
1859: The monks move to St. Joseph because of St. Cloud land litigation
1861: Civil War breaks out
1862: Indian uprising; 38 Sioux men are hanged in Mankato
1863: The sisters move to St. Joseph
1864: St. Cloud land litigation goes against St. John’s; the monks move to Indianbush
1866: The monks move to the shores of the lake later known as Lake Sagatagan

Early Chronology
“Before 1853, the Winnebago Indians, who had been brought up to Minnesota in 1849 and lived on a reservation at or near Long Prairie in Todd County, had used that country north of the (real) Watab river for hunting grounds...”

“...the Chippewa (Ojibwe Ojibway) Indians had been here before the Winnebagoes, and there was occasional warfare between the two tribes. Neither the Winnebagoes nor the Chippewas left any very remarkable traces in Stearns Co...”

“When the Benedictines came to Minnesota (1856), some Winnebagoes were still in the State, and Chippewas lived scattered in several bands in the north... After the transfer of the Winnebagoes to a new reservation near Mankato between 1854 and 1857, and the establishment of White Earth Reservation [in] 1867, we saw very few Indians around here.”

Hoffmann’s *Natural History of Collegeville*, p.4 (top) & p. 6.
"The first inhabitants of our township were Indians, before they were confined in Reservations...Up to 1862 the Sioux roved as far north as Meeker County, and the Chippewas in the northern half of our State. They had few settlements. Usually near the lakes and rivers. They were a sort of Nomads, hanging their hats (if they had any) where they found the best fishing and hunting...

...they used to roam about in the northern part of our township and burnt some of the woods. We have no other tradition about them."

From the Abbey Archives.

Natural History of Collegeville, Minnesota
by Alexius Hoffmann, O.S.B. (originally written in 1926, finished in 1934). 38 pages.
There were hints indicating that U.S. treaties with the Indians involved a border that crossed Saint John’s land.
1825 Treaty

August 19, 1825 treaty at Prairie du Chien, “in the territory of Michigan”

“...thence in a straight line to the mouth of the first river which enters the Mississippi on its west side above the mouth of Sac river...”

“...thence ascending the said river (above the mouth of Sac river) to a small lake at its source...”

p. 250, Aug. 19 treaty at Prairie du Chien (“Prairie of the Dog”)
http://dc.library.okstate.edu/digital/collection/kapplers/id/17917/rec/1

“The town's name apparently dates back to the 1730s when fur traders encountered a Mesquakie camp on the prairie. The Chief's name was Alim, which meant dog, so the French traders translated the word into its French counterpart: chien.” http://mississippivalleytraveler.com/prairie-du-chien/
1847 Treaty

“The Chippewa...sell to the United States all the land within the following boundaries...

...a direct line to the sources of the Watab River, thence down the Watab to the Mississippi...”

Indian affairs: laws and treaties, Vol. 2 (Treaties), Treaty with the Chippewa of the Mississippi and Lake Superior, 1847, Page 567
The Winnebago Indians hereby cede, sell, and convey to the United States... 897,900 acres; the boundary-lines of which are thus described...

...in a direct line to the sources of the Watab River; thence down the Watab to the Mississippi..."
Minnesota Historical Society, title page & p. 617
SJU Library Oversize Special Collection E 78 .M7 M6 1911
The Aborigines of Minnesota: A report showed the 1825 treaty line on an 1852 map.

SJU Library Oversize Special Collection E 78 .M7 M6 1911
Color map from http://www.freeprintable.com/print/free-printable-maps/us-map--minnesota-rivers-and-streams
Minnesota Historical Society, p. 583 
SJU Library Oversize Special Collection E 78 .M7 M6 1911
Color map from http://www.freeprintable.com/print/free-printable-maps/us-map--minnesota-rivers-and-streams
Minnesota Historical Society, p. 583
SJU Library Oversize Special Collection E 78 .M7 M6 1911
zooming in on the 1825 treaty line –
– to the point where the Watab River enters the Mississippi

Color map from http://www.freeprintable.com/print/free-printable-maps/us-map--minnesota-rivers-and-streams
Minnesota Historical Society, p. 583
SJU Library Oversize Special Collection E 78 .M7 M6 1911
BEFORE THE WHITES CAME.
Source: History of Stearns County, Minnesota, by William Bell Mitchell, Chicago 1915

Stearns was for over a century in the frontier between the Dakotas and the Ojibways. An attempt was made by the treaty of Prairie du Chien in 1825 to stop the age-long feud between the Dakota and the Ojibway, and the United States, acting as a friendly conciliating and arbitrating power, got the hostile tribes to agree to a division of their territory.

The portion of the boundary between the Dakota and the Ojibway, extending from Chappewa river to Otter tail lake, was surveyed in 1835 by S. A. Bean. The line enters Stearns where the Watab empties into the Mississippi, and according to treaty, follows this stream to its source; but by this surveyor, according to Winchell in "The Aborigines of Minnesota," "the head of the Watab river was assumed to be a small lake located in the N. E. corner of T. 124 N., R. 30 W., which is in reality the head of a tributary to that stream, the actual main source of the river being a number of miles to the southwest." This lake chosen by the surveyor must be one of the lakes near St. John's college.

Images from https://books.google.com/books?id=1J8yAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&q=william+bell+mitchell&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjiRs_OY8ZfZAhWlk1kKHQZxA5lQ6wEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=william%20bell%20mitchell&f=false
1825 Treaty (again)

So, in other words, although some assumed that a small lake at St. John’s was the head, and that the treaty boundary was thus the north branch of the Watab River and Stumpf lake, the actual line was the south branch of the Watab River.

SJU Library Oversize Special Collection E 78 .M7 M6 1911
Color map from http://www.freeprintable.com/print/free-printable-maps/us-map--minnesota-rivers-and-streams
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