

# Bois Blanc Island: Last Remnant of Mackinac's Great Lakes Empire

## A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

### Bois Blanc Island



A view southeastward from Mackinac Island's busy waterfront, from the East Bluff above or from Fort Holmes at the highest point on Mackinac Island, will show two islands: a smaller, rounded island with a lighthouse, and a long, low, wooded island stretching out toward the horizon. These islands are Round Island and Bois Blanc. Bois Blanc calls itself "the other island in the Straits of Mackinac."

The town of Mackinac Island, founded in 1781, was once the largest settlement in northern Michigan and the dominant anchor of the upper Great Lakes. When the Territory of Michigan organized Michilimackinac County (now Mackinac County) in 1818, it included much of the Lower Peninsula north of the Grand River, and all of the larger islands in the Territory. This

decision helped cause Mormon leader James Jesse Strang's hostility to Mackinac Island in the mid-1850s, because until 1855 Beaver Island was politically subject to Mackinac. Throughout the 1800s, piece after piece of Mackinac County was sliced off to form younger counties, until Mackinac County was left with a strip of land surrounding St. Ignace, plus Mackinac Island and Bois Blanc Island. To this day, Bois Blanc residents who want to conduct county business either take a boat to St. Ignace, or else take the ferryboat to Cheboygan and drive from there.

Bois Blanc has long-standing ties with Mackinac Island, dating back to Native American days when Mackinac Natives went to Bois Blanc in springtime to tap maple syrup. Elizabeth Baird (1810-90) recalled her part-Native Amer-



At left: This narrow gauge Shay steam locomotive was used for lumbering on Bois Blanc Island from 1920 to 1926. Divers have searched for the engine in Lake Huron, where legend says it was discarded, but it has never been found.

ican family's sugar camp on Bois Blanc in the 1820s and the maple-sugar festival they held there annually. Fort Mackinac soldiers and American Fur Company workers used Bois Blanc, too. During the icy months, fatigue parties shuttled back and forth to Bois Blanc to cut firewood. During the first half of the 1800s, much of the burnable wood on Mackinac Island itself had been cut down for the heating stoves and cookstoves of military and civilian Islanders, and Mackinac Island looked very different from what it does today.

The fort also required a constant supply of lime for plastering and log chinking. After the War of 1812, Fort Mackinac soldiers appear to have turned to the western tip of Bois Blanc as a source for much of this

lime, which was obtained by a chemical reduction process. (Limestone is converted into lime by being heated in an anaerobic atmosphere to a temperature of at least 900°C.) Fort soldiers built a beehive-shaped oven of rocks and tried to seal the interior from fresh air by daubing the cracks with mud, moss, and other sticky material. They then carried limestone to the oven and heated it into lime.

At one point, Fort Mackinac soldiers had tried to build at least one working lime kiln on Mackinac Island itself. The lime kiln remains can be seen on Lime Kiln Trail north of Fort Mackinac. However, the jagged pieces of locally-quarried Mackinac Island breccia rock did not form good building material for the airtightness required by the kilning process. Flat pieces of dolomite quarried at what is called Lime Kiln Point, on the extreme western end of Bois Blanc, proved to be the best local stone available. Bois Blanc historian Mike White has discovered at least two kiln sites on Bois Blanc that were used in the early 1800s. Plaster from Bois Blanc may have been used to finish and seal the interiors of many

of Mackinac Island's classic buildings.

The name Bois Blanc means "white wood," a reference to the American basswood, whose creamy-white, high-tensile strength underbark was used by Straits of Mackinac Indians for all sorts of useful purposes. Bois Blanc timber has found a home on Mackinac. While most early Mackinac sawn wood came from the mainland via the water-powered sawmill at Mill Creek southeast of Mackinaw City, for more than 150 years Mackinac Island imported whole peeled logs from Bois Blanc for various purposes. Good-quality white cedar from Bois Blanc's flat, damp, boggy areas could be used to build palisades such as the wooden wall surrounding Fort Mackinac. Many old-timers will remember the cedar fencing that used to protect hikers on Island trails, and the tallest, straightest Bois Blanc cedar logs were much in demand for use as flagpoles.

One of the last major Mackinac Island construction projects that used Bois Blanc logs was the 1956 Great Hall at Mission Point Resort. This room, originally built as a convention center lobby and gathering place for the Moral Re-Armament movement, used Bois Blanc logs of Norway pine to truss the lofty roof. The exposed logs help to create one of the most dramatic interior spaces on Mackinac Island. Other Bois Blanc logs were used in the interior of the Mission Point Theater (1954-55).

Bois Blanc old-growth timber has long been prized by loggers, and one grove was logged with the only railroad ever built on an island in the Straits of Mackinac, the Stafford R.R. This all-freight,

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