



Fall 2013

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Abstract

In a recent article on the advent of borderlands history as a prominent field of historical scholarship, Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett described borderlands as “realms where boundaries are also crossroads, peripheries are also central places, homelands are also passing-through places, and the end points of empire are also forks in the road.” One such region that certainly fits this definition of a borderland and unquestionably hosts such specific crossroads and cultural junctions is the maritime region of the Great Lakes of North America. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Great Lakes, Border Region, Borderland, Geography

Disciplines

Cultural History | Geography | History | Human Geography

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Senior Thesis

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December 2013

Introduction

In a recent article on the advent of borderlands history as a prominent field of historical scholarship, Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett described borderlands as “realms where boundaries are also crossroads, peripheries are also central places, homelands are also passing-through places, and the end points of empire are also forks in the road.”¹ One such region that certainly fits this definition of a borderland and unquestionably hosts such specific crossroads and cultural junctions is the maritime region of the Great Lakes of North America.

The Great Lakes region is unique as a maritime borderland. Where other borderlands involved interaction between groups across broad terrestrial planes, the Great Lakes featured contact across an expanse of interlocking waterways, with only limited areas of terrestrial habitation and interaction. Because of this maritime geography, encounters between the various people groups of the Great Lakes were concentrated around specific geographic localities. Thus, while other borderland regions demonstrate all the components laid out by Hämäläinen and Truett in a conceptual sense, the Great Lakes is distinct in that it features these concentrated crossroads and “forks in the road” in the physical sense, as concrete locations of interaction. The maritime nature of dictated that the Great Lakes borderland saw much of the interactions between its groups taking place in these concentrated areas, where most of the conflict, trade, and intercultural experience occurred on an amplified scale.

The importance of these geographical centers of contact is best highlighted in the early to mid-eighteenth century, when the French, British, and various indigenous nations all vied for power along these inland seas. In this borderland, cross cultural interactions, navigation, settlement, and exchange concentrated around specific geographic crossroads of close proximity because of the physical landscape of the lakes. Such locations included natural straits and narrows along the maritime passages of the Great Lakes, as well as portage routes over and around navigational barriers. The Strait of Michilimackinac,

¹ Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, “On Borderlands,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (2011): 338.

which lies between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan, the Detroit River,² which connects the upper Great Lakes with Lake Erie, and the Portage and Falls of the Niagara, which link the navigable waters of the St. Lawrence River-Lake Ontario system with the rest of the Great Lakes, are three such examples of these geographic centers of cross-cultural interaction.³

Such concretely specific geographic localities offer a focused setting with which to study the Great Lakes borderland as a whole. In these locations, the entire spectrum of cross-cultural contact took place. They were essentially microcosms of the intercultural borderlands experience of the entire region—epicenters of interaction. These sites naturally became such epicenters because of the physical geography of the Great Lakes, holding strategic and commercial significance for the European and indigenous powers of the region as well as being theatres for concentrated trade, cultural exchange, and cohabitation.

Epicenters Rather Than Gateways, Borderland Rather Than Frontier

While the significance of such places as the Niagara Portage, the Detroit River, or the Strait of Michilimackinac have long been appreciated, sites such as these have historically been viewed in scholarship as gateways or passageways for European expansion westward. Playing a vital role in the

² For the purposes of this paper, the author will refer to the connection between Lake Huron and Lake Erie as the Detroit River area. More specifically, the waterway connecting the two lakes is comprised of the Detroit River, Lake St. Clair (Otsi-Keta), and the St. Clair River as one travels south to north. The entire narrows of the two rivers and lake combined will be referred to as Detroit. Throughout the eighteenth century, the area was referred to collectively as the Detroit River, the Detroit Strait, or the Detroit Narrows. Moreover, having a succinct term for the complete waterway between Lake Erie and Lake Huron will also facilitate the flow of the paper.

³ Modern names of lakes, straits, and rivers will be used throughout the paper to avoid confusion. The French, who were the first Europeans into the Great Lakes region, initially believed the St. Lawrence River to maintain as one continuous river from the source of Lake Superior to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. They referred to Lake Ontario as Frontenac, Lake Erie as Conti, Lake Huron as either the Lake of the Hurons or Lake Orleans, Lake Michigan as the Lake of the Illinois or sometimes as Lake Dauphin, and Lake Superior as Lake Condé. The various indigenous peoples of the region also had their own terms for these great bodies of water. While historically, there has been much variation in terms applied to these bodies of water, for clarity's sake, the author will use the current, Anglo-American labels for the geography. One example of the French terms for the Great Lakes geography can be seen in the 1689 account, Henri de Tonti, *An Account of Monsieur de La Salle's Last Expedition and Discoveries in North America Presented to the French King, and Published by the Chevalier Tonti, Governour of Fort St. Louis, in the Province of the Illinois* (New York: 1814). Collections of the New York Historical Society. Another French Account which uses several other variants is the 1683 account, Louis Hennepin, *A Description of Louisiana, Newly Discovered to the Southwest of New France*, trans. and ed. John G. Shea (New York: John G. Shea, 1880).

French and British incursions into, and later the United States' advance across the North American continent, the maritime system of the Great Lakes and its important geographic sites has been studied by generations of historians.

As early as the late eighteenth century, scholars were writing about the strategic importance specific locations held in the power struggle between the British, French and Native Americans in the region of the Great Lakes. Contemporary writers of the eighteenth century, such as John Entick and William Clark wrote extensively on the struggles between the British, French, and Natives over this region, highlighting strategic areas such as the Niagara Portage as key to power in the region.⁴ Most of the contemporary accounts of these specific geographic locations stressed their strategic, and in some cases, commercial importance, but failed to examine them as cultural crossroads. For instance, when Clark discussed Niagara, he referred to it as “that important pass” that holds the “key of the entrance into the Great Lakes.”⁵ Writers like Clark saw locations like Niagara as entranceways to points further west, rather than as epicenters of cross-cultural interaction.

This thinking carried beyond the contemporary era of the eighteenth century, as historians like Francis Parkman took up the same narrative in nineteenth-century scholarship on the struggle for the region. Parkman, in his accounts of the Seven Years' War in North America, explicitly named Niagara, Detroit, and Michilimackinac as the three most important sites in the struggle for North America but discussed them in the language of an east-to-west context.⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, also guilty of this perspective, identified the Great Lakes and other areas in American history as frontiers where the momentum of interaction and expansion was always moving westward.⁷ This, however, is an oversimplification of the Great Lakes maritime region. This borderland theatre and the specific sites being

⁴ See The Rev. John Entick, and Other Gentlemen, *The General History of the Late War: Containing It's Rise, Progress, and Event, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America* 4 (London, 1763); William Clark, *Observations on the Late and Present Conduct of the French*, (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1755).

⁵ William Clark, *Observations on the Late and Present Conduct of the French* (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1755). Found in the “Dedication” section- not numbered.

⁶ Francis Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe: The French and Indian War* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 40.

⁷ John Mack Faragher, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: The Significance of the Frontier in American History, and Other Essays* (New York: H. Holt, 1994).

examined do not fit into the mold of westward, civilizing expansion, but rather, undermine such notions. The Strait of Michilimackinac, for instance, the furthest inland of the three locations, was a bustling trade post, military fort, and Catholic mission for the French even before the eastern city of Philadelphia was founded.⁸ Like other regions of scholarship which have found discrepancies with Turner's westward oriented theory, the Great Lakes cannot simply be examined as an east to west advance with sites like the Niagara Portage, the Detroit River, or the Strait of Michilimackinac acting as gateways to progressive phases of westward expansion.⁹

Sites like the Niagara Portage, the Detroit River, and the Strait of Michilimackinac, rather than being passageways for a linear progression westward, were locations where different groups came together from all directions and interacted in a plethora of ways from conflict to trade and inter-cultural settlement. These sites may have been gateways for the advancing Anglo-Americans following the defeat of the French after the Seven Years' War, but that is only one small dimension of the significance of these sites as cultural confluences. Algonquian peoples of the Upper Great Lakes moved south through and to these places because of their geographical location and features, Indian nations of the Illinois country moved east to these hubs of trade and cultural exchange, and even French voyageurs and missionaries

⁸ Walter Havighurst, *Three Flags at the Straits: The Forts of Mackinac* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), ix; The French explorer Jean Nicolet is the first known European to pass through the Strait of Michilimackinac in 1634. By 1671, French Jesuits and traders had set up a post on the north shore of the strait known as Ste. Ignace. This post was eventually abandoned and the permanent post of Michilimackinac was constructed directly adjacent from the ruins of the original post. Walter Havighurst, *Three Flags at the Straits: The Forts of Mackinac* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 3-16. The ruins of the abandoned Ste. Ignace are depicted on the eighteenth century map of the area: Jaques Nicholas Bellin, *Partie Occidentale de la Nouvelle France ou du Canada*, map (Nuremberg, Homann Heirs: 1755), located in John H.W. Stuckenberg Map Collection, Special Collections- Musselman Library, Gettysburg College.

⁹ One of the many issues later scholars have struggled to endorse from Jackson's Frontier theory is this concept of a progressive frontier, moving in a linear east to west fashion. This theory is not only an oversimplification of the reality of the eighteenth century Great Lakes borderland but also of other borderland regions such as those in the American Southwest and those borderlands regions of Central and South America. For further reading on the problems with Turner theory and westward expansion of frontiers in these regions, see David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch, eds., *Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994).

spread throughout the Great Lakes, Illinois, and Upper Mississippi country converged on places like the Straits of Michilimackinac or Detroit from every direction.¹⁰

The problematic terminology of frontier, with its westward moving connotations, and any notion of these sites as gateways or entranceways, therefore, has been abandoned in this study. Instead, these locations will be viewed and discussed as epicenters of interaction where the different groups of the Great Lakes region encountered one another in a concentrated physical space. Furthermore, the region as a whole will be considered and referred to as a maritime borderland, with an explicit fluidity of boundaries hinted at in the phrase.¹¹

Physical Geography and Natural Crossroads

By a careful examination of the geographical layout of the maritime system of the Great Lakes, it is evident that there are certain natural areas of navigational concentration along its waterways. Areas like the Strait of Michilimackinac and the Detroit River, where the flow of water and subsequently, human traffic and transportation, were funneled into narrows and straits naturally lent themselves to concentrated interaction. Other sites, where natural obstacles arrested travel, such as the great cataracts of Niagara, also became areas of close contact amongst groups because of the portage routes formed around them. The natural geographic significance of places like Niagara, the Detroit River, and Michilimackinac is apparent

¹⁰ The effort to avoid an east-to-west examination of these sites as gateways or entranceways into the interior was inspired by Daniel K. Richter's *Facing East From Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Several other terms should be fleshed out before the paper begins its discussion of these epicenters in earnest, and to allow for fluidity, the author will address them in the footnote section rather than directly in the text. This paper will use the term American Indian, or Indian, to identify Native Americans of the Great Lakes region. Indian, while accepted by many of the First Nation/Native American tradition of North America, is not in and of itself an offensive term, and will also allow for concise identification in the paper. With that being said, this paper will not indulge in the racially-charged terms "tribe" or "chief." The different Indian groups of the region will either be referred to as their proper noun, for example, the Huron, or will be collectively be referred to as Indian nations. Individual leaders of the Indian Nations will simply be identified by their commonly known names, such as Pontiac, or Joseph Brant. As Richard White notes in his work on the Great Lakes region, "there was no more an office of chief in Algonquian societies than there was in French society." Therefore, to avoid falsely labeling or generically naming individuals, this term will be avoided. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1991), 37.

when examining contemporary maps of the region and primary sources of travelers who navigated the watery expanses of this borderland.

From the French settlements along the St. Lawrence River down through Lake Ontario to the rapids of the Niagara River lay a navigable span of water for any *bateau* or canoe to traverse without issue. This upstream movement was halted however, upon arrival in the river, where a series of rapids, a whirlpool, and finally, the great falls themselves stood as barricades to further travel into the Great Lakes. One of the earliest European accounts of this great natural barrier written by Louis Hennepin, a missionary who accompanied René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle's expedition through the Great Lakes in the latter half of the seventeenth century. His account, published upon his return from the expedition in 1683, described this great "discharge of so much water, coming from these fresh water seas" as the central confluence of the four upper Great Lakes. He viewed this location as the site where the waterways of the entire region "come at last, massed at this great fall."¹² Any party wishing to ascend or descend the Great Lakes had to confront this point of convergence and go around it via portage routes on either the western or eastern shore of the Niagara River.¹³

The geographical sites of the Niagara Falls and Portage, the Detroit River, and the Strait of Michilimackinac were widely appreciated, even during the time period. Louis Hennepin described Niagara Falls with great gusto, exaggerating the height to be 600 feet. Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, a Jesuit priest passing through the straits in 1720, noted the site's advantageous geographical position, essentially resting in the junction between Lake Huron and Lake Erie, with the route to Lake

¹² Louis Hennepin, *A Description of Louisiana, Newly Discovered to the Southwest of New France*, trans. and ed. John G. Shea (New York: John G. Shea, 1880), 379. Accessed via "Early Encounters in North America" (Chicago: Alexander Street Press in Collaboration with the University of Chicago, 2012), <http://solomon.eena.alexanderstreet.com>

¹³ As Charlevoix informed his reader, the French initially made their ascent around the falls and rapids by way of a five league portage route on the western shore of the Niagara River. They did however, after becoming better familiarized with the Niagara country, find a more navigable and shorter portage route on the eastern shore. This route of three leagues would eventually become the main portage route around the falls for the French, the British, and eventually the Americans, and most likely was the original native route as well. Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *A Voyage to North-America: Undertaken by Command of the Present King of France. Containing the Geographical Description and Natural History of Canada and Louisiana. with the Customs, Manners, Trade and Religion of the Inhabitants; a Description of the Lakes and Rivers, with their Navigation and Manner of Passing the Great Cataracts* 1 (Dublin: John Exshaw and James Potts, 1766), 206. Accessed via "Eighteenth Century Collections Online" (Gale Group: 2008).

Superior nearby as well.¹⁴ The geography of such sites was not simply known by those who traversed the waters of the lakes and the leadership of the European powers. It was even known amongst colonists of the eastern provinces. In a 1721 sermon given in Boston, Cotton Mather was able to make reference to the terrible din of the cataracts of the Niagara when conjuring up images of the “dreadful sound” of God’s wrath.¹⁵ For a minister in the far eastern reaches of the British colonies to be able to make reference to Niagara Falls in a sermon, as early as 1721, demonstrates how widely known and thus, how geographically important these sites were to inhabitants of North America during the eighteenth century.

This natural barrier of Niagara and the portage routes circumventing it were so important to the region in the eighteenth century that they are clearly marked on maps from the time period. This would not be so noteworthy, except that most other natural and geographical elements of the Great Lakes portrayed on these maps are inaccurate and distorted, if shown at all. An English map of the Great Lakes from 1733, for example, is detailed enough to include a dotted line showing the eight mile portage from Fort Niagara up to the navigable stretch of the Niagara River south of the falls.¹⁶ The cartographer Jaques Nicholas Bellin failed miserably in his estimation of the size and scale of the English colony of Pennsylvania and the Chesapeake Bay area in his map of 1755, and even lacked perspective when depicting the crucial Ohio country. His portrayal of the Niagara River, however, along with other such navigational focal points as the Detroit River and the Strait of Michilimackinac, was accurate and detailed in comparison.

Accurate knowledge of the geography of these natural passageways was deemed so vital that in Thomas Powell’s 1776 map of the lakes, he included specific directions and notes around them. In the Detroit River area, the map indicated “this strait is passable with shipping, with a good gale.” When

¹⁴ Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *A Voyage to North-America* 2 (Dublin: John Exshaw and James Potts, 1766), 32.

¹⁵ Cotton Mather, *The Dreadful Sound*, a sermon (Boston: B. Green, 1721), 19.

¹⁶ Jaques Nicholas Bellin, *Partie Occidentale de la Nouvelle France ou du Canada*, map (Nuremberg, Homann Heirs: 1755), Located in John H.W. Stuckenberg Map Collection, Special Collections- Musselman Library, Gettysburg College.; Henry Popple, *A Map of the British Empire in America* (London, William Henry Toms and R.W. Seale: 1733), Located in David Rumsey Historical Map Collection. <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.

depicting Niagara, the same map maker deemed it necessary to demarcate the gentle currents from the swift and dangerous currents.¹⁷

Cartographers of the time were explicit in drawing what they saw to be the natural lines of transportation and navigations across these waterways as well. In several maps from the period, dotted lines spanning the length of the lakes from Fort Frontenac, on the eastern extremity of Lake Ontario, to Fort Michilimackinac and points west, indicated the natural geographic routes of the region.¹⁸ These are no arbitrary indicators but can be validated as accurate chartings from the countless journals of those Europeans who ventured into the region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From French Jesuits to English traders, almost every contemporary travel account from the region during this time notes passing around the Niagara portage, up the Detroit River, and through the Strait of Michilimackinac on their journeys inland.

Looking at a map even today, one can distinguish the natural passageways that French voyageurs, native hunters, or British military personnel would have had to navigate through in order to move west and inland along the lakes. Along the system of lakes, several locations present themselves as natural passage points, through which most, if not all, human traffic in the region would have passed during the eighteenth century—the most distinct being the identified areas of Niagara, Detroit, and Michilimackinac.¹⁹ The geographic layout of the region itself led these locations to become such epicenters of interaction and importance for the competing cultures of the eighteenth century Great Lakes.

¹⁷ Thomas Pownell, et al., *Map of the Middle Colonies in North America* (London: John Almon, 1776), Located in David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.

¹⁸ Henry Popple, *A Map of the British Empire in America* (London, William Henry Toms and R.W. Seale: 1733), Located in David Rumsey Historical Map Collection. <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.

¹⁹ There were several alternate routes of inland rivers which were used by the French to travel from the settlements of Canada across to the Georgian Bay of Lake Huron specifically, such as the route through the Ottawa River to Lake Nipissing and the French River depicted in Jaques Nicholas Bellin, *Partie Occidentale de la Nouvelle France ou du Canada*, map (Nuremberg, Homann Heirs: 1755), Located in John H.W. Stuckenberg Map Collection, Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College. The personal journal of Alexander Henry, an English trader who ventured to Michilimackinac directly following the fall of French Canada, also describes this route as that through which he passes into the upper Great Lakes in Alexander Henry, *Travels & Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between the Years 1760 and 1776*, ed. Elliot Coues (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1901). It is, however, safe to say that the majority of Native, British, and French traffic from the interior lakes east, and vice versa, passed through the main channels of the Great Lakes, and thus traversed through the Niagara Portage, the Detroit River, and the Strait of Michilimackinac.

Strategic and Commercial Importance

The geography of the region caused these crossroad areas to rise to prominence as great strategic and commercial locations for the various competing groups of the mid-eighteenth century. Niagara, the Detroit River, and the Strait of Michilimackinac successively controlled the bottleneck areas of inter-lake trade and transportation. Because of this, they were essential both strategically and commercially to the British, French, and Indian nations. This commercial and strategic significance was not lost on the different groups inhabiting the region at the time. Both the French and British noted these positions as key for both military and commercial success in North America, and the Indian nations of the region had been warring with one another for control over these passageways along the lakes since before the Beaver Wars of the seventeenth century.²⁰

Niagara Falls, stood as a great natural barrier to any movement inland from Lake Ontario and any movement eastward from the interior lakes. Thus the portage route around the falls and rapids was crucial to any party wishing to navigate from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario or vice versa. Various groups recognized this and attempted to control the Falls and Portage of Niagara over the course of the eighteenth century. The Iroquois, declared allies of the British during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, ethnically cleansed the region of the resident Attawandaron nation during the Beaver Wars and laid claim to the region for themselves.²¹ The British, in turn, saw the Iroquois League as a dependent state of the British North American Empire and laid their own claim for the Niagara region against their French rivals

²⁰ The Beaver Wars, sometimes called the French and Iroquois Wars, were a series of drawn out conflicts in the seventeenth century in which the Iroquois League, supported first by the Dutch and later the English, raided north, west, and south from the Iroquois country of present day New York in an attempt to gain more territory, increase their hunting lands, and most importantly, acquire beaver pelts and captives from their neighboring Indian nations. As part of this series of conflicts, the Iroquois raiding parties ventured into the Western Great Lakes region, asserting their dominance over the Huron, Erie, and other Algonquian-speaking nations in the Ohio and Michigan country. For an overview of the Beaver Wars and the Iroquoian rise to power, see Daniel P. Barr, *Unconquered: The Iroquois League at War in Colonial America* (West Port, CT.: Praeger, 2006). Also see Allan Forbes, "Two and a Half Centuries of Conflict: The Iroquois and the Laurentian Wars," *Pennsylvania Archaeology*, 40, no. 3-4 (1970): 1-20; Daniel K. Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (Oct., 1983): 528-559.

²¹ Daniel P. Barr, *Unconquered: The Iroquois League at War in Colonial America* (West Port, CT.: Praeger, 2006).

as part of the Treaty of Utrecht.²² The French had long maintained a presence in the immediate area of Niagara Falls. Already by the late seventeenth century, Jacques-Rene de Brisay, Marquis de Denonville, had constructed a fort along the eastern shore of the Niagara River. Though unsuccessful, the French again established a permanent post at the same site as early as 1720 under the command of Lieutenant Louis-Thomas, Chabert de Joncaire. This post lay directly aside what would become the trailhead of the main portage around Niagara and was to become one of the most strategic positions of the interior continent during the Seven Years' War in North America.²³

Niagara was seen by many Europeans as the key to controlling the entire Great Lakes region both commercially and otherwise. The Jesuit priest Charlevoix, who traveled through the area in 1720, saw it as "a place which should secure the free communication [access] of the lakes." Charlevoix and his countrymen also feared the implications of British control of such a spot, believing that such would lead to the ruining of French trade with the Indian Nations entirely.²⁴

An essay written in the British colonies at the onset of the Seven Years' War by the British colonial leader Archibald Kennedy called for the immediate taking of Fort Niagara, which the author saw as the crux of power between France and Britain in the Great Lakes and Ohio regions. He described Crown Point and the Forks of the Ohio as mere "appendages" to the great strategic position of Niagara, and declared that by taking this position, Great Britain would become a powerful nation and their monarch "one of the greatest princes, perhaps, on the face of the earth."²⁵ Directly following the end of

²² The Treaty of Utrecht, ratified in 1713, ended the War of Spanish Succession in Europe. As part of this treaty, France ceded some of its North American claims to the British, including Acadia and the Hudson Bay area. The British also declared sovereignty over all lands of their native allies, the Iroquois, which included the Niagara country. The French did not recognize the Niagara country as part of the legitimate land cessions of the treaty and thus, failed to respect British claims to the land when they erected the first post at Niagara. This political impasse over Niagara is mentioned in Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *A Voyage to North-America* 1, (Dublin: John Exshaw and James Potts, 1766), 199; The Rev. John Entick and Other Gentlemen, *The General History of the Late War: Containing Its Rise, Progress, and Event, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America* 4 (London: 1763), 16.

²³ Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *A Voyage to North-America* 1, (Dublin: John Exshaw and James Potts, 1766), 197. Accessed via *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale Group. Gettysburg College.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 199.

²⁵ Archibald Kennedy, *Serious Advice to the Inhabitants of the Northern-Colonies, on the Present Situation of Affairs* (New York, James Parker: 1755). Crown Point refers to the critical French position of Fort Ste. Frédéric on Lake Champlain and the Ohio refers to the Forks of the Ohio and Fort Duquesne—present day Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At the outset of hostilities in North America, the British planned a three pronged attack to drive back

the Seven Years' War in North America, accounts like John Entick's identified Niagara specifically as the key to the French Empire in North America. He stated in a footnote in his history that

Niagara commands, in a manner, all the interior parts of North-America, and is a key as it were to that whole continent—opens or obstructs the communication with all the natives of North-America, the six nations, Ohios, Shawanees, Miamis, Twightwies, Illinois, Pontewatimis, Nadouessians, Hurons, Utawas, Messasagues, and many others—awes and commands all those people—lies in the midst of the extensive territory of the six nations, and commands their beaver country entirely—secures their fur trade, and all the other inland trade of North America. It commands all the great lakes, and secures the navigation of them.²⁶

This appreciation of Niagara, and to a lesser extent, the other two locations farther inland, as key strategic positions in the holding of the Great Lakes region was quite prevalent before, during, and after the eruption of the hostilities of the Seven Years' War in North America.

With both European powers putting such emphasis on these specific sites as key to victory during their struggle for hegemony in North America, it is not surprising that these sites, especially Niagara, would become military objectives during the Seven Years' War between Britain and France. From the outbreak of hostilities in 1754, Niagara was one of the main objectives of the British plan to overcome their French adversaries. Governor Shirley of Massachusetts received the task to take the vital crossroads by General Edward Braddock in 1755, but the expedition stalled in the wake of Braddock's own devastating defeat along the Monongahela.²⁷ Subsequent expeditions were mounted and abandoned until

French encroachments on what they saw as British lands. The first thrust was to drive towards Duquesne and was led by General Edward Braddock. The second prong, commanded by Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts, was to seize Fort Niagara, and the third, led by Sir William Johnson, was to advance on Lake Champlain and Fort Ste Frédéric. Braddock's expedition was soundly defeated along the Monongahela on July 9th, 1755, and in response, Governor Shirley's expedition against Niagara stalled. Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 86-112. It is likely that Mr. Kennedy's essay was either written during the preparatory stages of the three pronged strategy as a way of influencing policy or in response to the British disaster at the Monongahela. There is no clear indication at what time of the year Kennedy's letter was written, but its suggestion to make Niagara as the main objective as opposed to Crown Point or the Forks of the Ohio in allusions to the British grand strategy of North America insinuates that letter was written overtly in response to the three pronged plan of Edward Braddock.

²⁶ The Rev. John Entick and Other Gentlemen, *The General History of the Late War: Containing It's Rise, Progress, and Event, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America* 4 (London: 1763), 135.

²⁷ Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 86-112.

the British-Iroquois forces led by Brigadier General John Prideaux, and later Sir William Johnson, besieged and took the fortress at the trailhead of the portage route in July of 1759.²⁸

The only reason the crucial positions of Fort Detroit and Fort Michilimackinac avoided major military action during the Seven Years' War was because of their extreme western orientation. Logistically, it was impossible for the British to reach such posts with an offensive force with barriers like Upper Canada and Fort Niagara still holding their attention in the east. The British war strategy was also focused on points of closer proximity to their colonies along the eastern seaboard, such as Lake Champlain and Canada proper. By the time the British took the Portage of Niagara, the war was coming to a close, with Canada falling to the British after the French governor, Pierre de Rigaud, Marquis de Vaudreuil surrendered in September of 1759.²⁹

The French surrender did not negate the importance of these western posts, however. Sir William Johnson, the superintendent of Indian Affairs for the British government in North America, was rapidly sent west to negotiate the peaceful transition of Fort Detroit into British hands. While Johnson orchestrated the peace of the western Great Lakes from Detroit, he was careful to stress the special importance of establishing a British garrison to the post at the Strait of Michilimackinac promptly because of that location's strategic position as crossroads of Lake Huron and Lake Michigan.³⁰

It was not only the Europeans who saw these epicenters as important strategic locations. The Iroquois League had encroached into the area around the Niagara Portage by the mid-seventeenth century in an attempt to increase its benefits from the Great Lakes beaver trade. The recognition that the Ottawa living around the Strait of Michilimackinac held for the location as an important position can be seen through their folklore. They believed that the deity who created the Great Lakes, Michabou, dwelt at the Strait; it being the central position and the spiritual seat of control for the entire Great Lakes region.³¹

²⁸ *ibid.*, 330-339.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 404-409.

³⁰ Richard Middleton, *Pontiac's War: Its Causes, Course, and Consequences* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), 43.

³¹ Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *A Voyage to North-America 2* (Dublin: John Exshaw and James Potts, 1766), 34.

The best demonstration of native recognition of the strategic importance of areas such as Detroit, Michilimackinac and Niagara, however, is the plan of the Seneca and subsequently, Pontiac, in their attempted risings against European encroachment during the last days of the Seven Years' War. In the spring of 1761, two Seneca leaders, Tahaiadoris and Kiashuta, fearful of British hegemony following the defeat of the French in Canada, constructed a six-part plan for a region-wide Indian revolt. The first step in this plan was to seize Fort Detroit from the British, thus interrupting European commercial interest in the interior lakes region. In concert with this move, the Seneca themselves planned to cut off the crucial post of Fort Niagara to isolate and subdue the British garrison there.³²

The Ottawa leader, Pontiac, adopted a similar plan during what would come to be known as Pontiac's War, or Pontiac's Revolt. During this trans-national Indian uprising of the Great Lakes and Ohio country, three of the central military campaigns of the war occurred along the Detroit River, the Strait of Michilimackinac, and the Portage of the Niagara. In Detroit, Pontiac and his forces failed to surprise the British garrison and thus subjected the fort to a prolonged siege—one of the only examples of a sustained siege orchestrated solely by native forces in eighteenth century North America.³³

The Strait of Michilimackinac was the scene of one of the most infamously bloody events of the entire conflict when natives, under the pretense of a sporting event, stormed the palisade and took possession of the fort in what would come to be called the Lacrosse Massacre of Michilimackinac. Along the portage route of the Niagara River, the Battle of Devil's Hole saw the largest loss of life for the British in any one engagement during the war, when a party of Seneca and Mingo warriors ambushed a military wagon train in September of 1763.³⁴ These three locations were recognized not only by the

³² Richard Middleton, *Pontiac's War: Its Causes, Course, and Consequences* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), 35.

³³ Gregory Evans Dowd, *War Under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations, and the British Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 118-120, 132-139.

³⁴ For an overview of Pontiac's War, see Gregory Evans Dowd, *War Under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations, and the British Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) and Richard Middleton, *Pontiac's War: Its Causes, Course, and Consequences* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2007); For a firsthand account of the fascinating events associated with the Lacrosse Massacre of Michilimackinac, see Alexander Henry, *Travels & Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between the Years 1760 and 1776* (Boston, Mass: Little Brown and Co., 1901), 74-103.

Europeans as strategically important to control of the Great Lakes system, but also to the Indian nations of the region, who fought several notable engagements during Pontiac's War in an attempt to thwart British dominance over the lakes.

The French, British, and native groups all jockeyed to gain control of the three locations of the Niagara Portage, the Detroit River, and the Strait of Michilimackinac because of their geographical position. These sites thus became key strategic positions during the eighteenth century struggle for control of the Great Lakes waterways. Commanding the most essential bottleneck areas of communication, trade, and transportation along the inland waterways, Niagara, Detroit and Michilimackinac were essential to control of the region. From the British campaigns against Niagara during the Seven Years' War, through to the Indian attacks focused around these three localities during Pontiac's War, one prominent form of interaction among the groups was no doubt violent competition. These three locations demonstrate the overall struggle for control over the region during the tumultuous time period of the mid-eighteenth century in the Great Lakes borderland in that they were all stages for the bloody scenes of the Seven Years' and Pontiac's Wars.

The reason for these episodes of bloodletting that occurred around the Niagara Portage, the Detroit River, and the Strait of Michilimackinac was because all groups involved considered them to be strategically necessary in controlling the region. Without the key geographical positions along these locations, neither the French, nor British, nor Indian nations of the Lakes could have hoped to control the region for themselves. It was not until the British defeated both the French and the allied nations of Pontiac that they were able to possess all three of these key areas without threat, and thus finally gain a relative hegemony over the Great Lakes.

Epicenters of Trade, Cultural Exchange, and Cohabitation

As important to the scholar of borderlands history as the strategic and commercial implications of such localities are the cultural interactions of these locations. Besides being strategically and commercially important in history, these locations were also sites of trade, cultural exchange, and

cohabitation. Unlike the majority of the vast expanse of the Great Lakes borderland, in locations such as Niagara, Detroit, and Michilimackinac, members of all the different groups of the region converged to trade, experience one another's cultures—whether voluntarily or not—and live together in a close proximity of heterogeneous settlement. According to European travelers from the time period and notes from contemporary eighteenth century maps, there existed a large extent of such inter-cultural contact at these locations.

Trade was one of the key contributors to these locations' growth as trading posts, forts, and settlements. The Great Lakes region boomed with the fur trade for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the native groups of these inland seas exchanging their hides and pelts with the French and British. In 1725, British reports from the trade heads at Schenectady and Albany estimated somewhere around 1,200 packs of furs and skins were obtained from the Indian nations of the Great Lakes that year alone. French trade along Lake Ontario during this same time was valued at 40,911 *livres* in 1723 and 29,297 *livres* the next year as the British competition began to cut into the French monopoly on furs in the region.³⁵ Such figures demonstrate how large and extensive the fur trade was in the Great Lakes at this time and also prompts the examination of specific hubs in this trade network, namely, the epicenters of Michilimackinac, the Detroit River, and Niagara.

Roughly half of all the goods brought in for New France came from the French trading position on the Niagara River.³⁶ The French conducted similar trade for pelts and furs at the Strait of Michilimackinac at this same time, where the bounty of the upper Great Lakes converged on these cross-roads of trade between Europeans and Indians. When Alexander Henry, a young English trader, prepared to go to Michilimackinac in 1763 he gained information from an old *metis* voyageur named Leduc, who informed him, in regards to the fur trade, “that Michilimackinac was richer, in this commodity, than any

³⁵ Figures taken from Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1991), 121.

³⁶ *ibid.*

other part of the world.”³⁷ Charlevoix made a similar statement when visiting the trading post there almost fifty years before, when he noted the “great trade of peltry,” the region being “the passage, or rendezvous of many of the savage nations.”³⁸ Jonathon Carver, when travelling through the Great Lakes in the later part of the eighteenth century, notes similar economic activity in the area around Fort Detroit. Here, he estimated there to be upwards of one hundred houses drawn to the prosperity of this wilderness crossroads. He also mentioned the barges that are by this time shipping goods up and down the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair.³⁹ These locations, again because of the geographical nature of the region, lent themselves as commercial focal points as the different native groups, French, and British travelled and traded through these natural crossroads.

Cultural exchange, mostly inadvertent, also took place at these epicenters, as can be gleaned from primary accounts of these specific locations. Charlevoix, while spending several days at the French post at Niagara in 1720, recorded his colorful experiences with native culture, including witnessing a performance by Mississauga Indians who demonstrated a peculiar feat when one danced while holding a hot coal in his mouth.⁴⁰ He recorded the Indian story of a Huron woman and her dreams, and also noted the interactions that the French had with the local inhabitants, the Seneca. Such inter-cultural interactions among such a wide array of people, from native dancers, to Jesuit priests, traders, Indian warriors, and French officials represents the multicultural microcosm that such geographic locations as Niagara created.

Alexander Henry, at Michilimackinac, shared much close interaction with the Chippewa, Sauk, and Ottawa who surrounded him there. In his journals, he recorded instances of Indian spirituality and their relationship with nature. He even experienced the cultural ritual of adoption firsthand, when the

³⁷ Alexander Henry, *Travels & Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between the Years 1760 and 1776* (Boston, Mass: Little Brown and Co., 1901), 11.

³⁸ Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *A Voyage to North-America 2* (Dublin: John Exshaw and James Potts, 1766), 31.

³⁹ Jonathon Carver, *Three Years Travels through the Interior Parts of North-America* (Philadelphia: Key and Simpson, 1796), 93-95.

⁴⁰ Charlevoix, Pierre-François-Xavier de, *A Voyage to North-America 1*, (Dublin: John Exshaw and James Potts, 1766), 202.

Chippewa, Wawatam, took him into his family as an honorary brother.⁴¹ Jonathon Carver, also in Michilimackinac later in the century, learned the Indian tactics of ice fishing for trout, something he had never done before. He also was schooled by the local natives in the art of preserving the fish after they were caught, which he described in his journal as one of his principle activities during his wintering at the strait.⁴²

Another obvious example of cross cultural exchange is that of Christianity and the native populations of the region. One of the principle reasons the French started a post in Michilimackinac was to establish a mission there for the conversion of Indians. Many of the earliest accounts of the region come from Jesuits and other French Christian missionaries—Hennepin and Charlevoix, to name just two. Along the Detroit River, even several decades after the French presence in the Great Lakes region had been officially removed, Jonathon Carver mentioned the presence of a French Carthusian still living among the Huron Indians there.⁴³

Religion and cultural practices were bound to be exchanged and shared between groups living in such close proximity. Because of this, areas around Niagara, Detroit, and Michilimackinac, as epicenters of cohabitation, became some of the first ethnically diverse and intercultural areas in the North American borderland. Many times, these cultures fused elements together to form a middle ground of exchange and shared practice.⁴⁴ As concentrated areas of interaction, these locations naturally became more heterogeneous both culturally and ethnically, as different groups encountered, and in many cases, dwelt with one another. This cohabitation of groups was a phenomenon unique to epicenters such as Niagara, Detroit, and Michilimackinac. In these geographic crossroads, the natural propensity to settle often overcame ethnic and cultural differences amongst groups.

⁴¹ Alexander Henry, *Travels & Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between the Years 1760 and 1776* (Boston, Mass: Little Brown and Co., 1901).

⁴² Jonathon Carver, *Three Years Travels through the Interior Parts of North-America* (Philadelphia: Key and Simpson, 1796), 93.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁴ For specific examples of this taking place along the French-Algonquian borderland of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

This phenomenon can be noted through an examination of maps from the time period, as cartographers such as Jaques Nicholas Bellin, Thomas Pownell, and Henry Popple all portray intercultural settlement around the Detroit River and Michilimackinac specifically. In the English map of the Detroit River, drawn at an earlier date by Pownell and printed in 1776, nine different Indian settlements are portrayed around Fort Detroit. These nine towns included villages of Ottawa, Huron, Pottawattamie, and a group called the Sissisogaes, and these settlements rest adjacent to a vast expanse on the north shore of Lake Erie as lands belonging to the Iroquois Nations.⁴⁵ Henry Popple's map of 1733 also demonstrates this cohabitation, showing both Pottawattamie and Ottawa settlements in the vicinity of the Strait of Michilimackinac.⁴⁶

Accounts of the time period corroborate the heterogeneous settlement that the maps of the time imply. Charlevoix, on his ascent up the Detroit River, identified "two pretty populous villages" along the same side of the river as the French settlement, the first belonging to the Huron nation and the second to the Pottawattamie. North of the fort and on the opposite bank of the river, Charlevoix recorded another village made up of displaced Ottawa Indians.⁴⁷

Along with this mixture of indigenous peoples at these epicenters of cultural interaction, there were also Europeans from many different backgrounds, ranging from Catholic clergy, army officers, traders, trappers, and voyageurs. These mixed European groups, coupled with the varied native populations surrounding these epicenters, makes for quite the diverse community of cohabitation in these specific locations.

⁴⁵ These "Sissisagaes" Indians are most likely of the Mississauga Nation, seeing that in other maps, these villages are attributed to them. Thomas Pownell, et al. *Map of the Middle Colonies in North America* (London: John Almon, 1776). Located in David Rumsey Historical Map Collection. <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.; See other map examples: Jaques Nicholas Bellin, *Partie Occidentale de la Nouvelle France ou du Canada*, map (Nuremberg, Homann Heirs: 1755), Located in John H.W. Stuckenberg Map Collection, Special Collections- Musselman Library, Gettysburg College.; Robert Sayer and John Bennet, *A General Map of the Middle British Colonies, in America* (London: Sayer and Bennet, 1776). Located in David Rumsey Historical Map Collection. <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.

⁴⁶ Henry Popple, *A Map of the British Empire in America* (London William Henry Toms and R.W. Seale: 1733). Located in David Rumsey Historical Map Collection. <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.

⁴⁷ Charlevoix, Pierre-François-Xavier de, *A Voyage to North-America* 2, (Dublin: John Exshaw and James Potts, 1766), 5.

Rather than simply interaction in the context of competition and conflict, these focal points of contact encouraged trade, cultural exchange, and cohabitation. The lucrative market of the fur trade spurred this interaction, while the geographical concentrative nature of these sites caused these epicenters to become multi-cultural sites of exchange and coexistence among American Indians, British, and French during the eighteenth century.

Conclusion

The Portage of the Niagara, the Detroit River, and the Strait of Michilimackinac serve to demonstrate the larger trends of interaction that were taking place among the various groups of the Great Lakes region during the mid-eighteenth century. As a maritime borderland, these key geographic locations rose to prominence as strategically and commercially significant sites, made so by the landscape and topography of the waterways themselves. As such significant sites, these positions also became epicenters for trade, cross-cultural exchanges, and cohabitation between British, French, and native peoples of the area, making them microcosms of the greater maritime borderland. These three specific locations can be used to open a systematic study of the entire borderland of the eighteenth century Great Lakes, allowing historians to study the interactions of the entire region through the lens of these geographical points of contact.

While this work has focused on these three specific epicenters for the purposes of its study, the concepts proposed, examined, and discussed in the context of Niagara, Detroit and Michilimackinac can be extended to a greater theatre. Other geographic epicenters in the Great Lakes region did exist, and could be studied more extensively. The portage of the Sault Ste Marie, leading into Lake Superior, the Grand Portage of the Minnesota country, the portage of Checagou leading to the Illinois River, or Fort St. Joseph, in Stinking Bay, could all be examined as similar focal points of contact. The examination could expand still further out from there, looking at places like Crown Point on Lake Champlain, Fort Duquesne at the Forks of the Ohio, and even beyond, to different borderlands region. The maritime nature of the Great Lakes borderland makes it particularly disposed to the identification of these key areas of

concentrated encounters, but the concept could be adjusted and applied to terrestrial borderlands' sites where geographic position facilitated similar levels of amplified interaction.

Because of its applicability, therefore, this study is about more than just the mid-eighteenth century history of the contested waters of the Great Lakes. It is an adjustable model which can be used to study the geographical components of borderlands interaction—how the physical landscape of a region can encourage cross-cultural contact amongst groups. The specific geographic sites of the Niagara Portage, the Detroit River, and the Strait of Michilimackinac are three specific examples where such concentrated amplification of interaction occurred in the maritime borderland region of the Great Lakes in the eighteenth century.

Appendix A: Map Collection

Fig. 1) *A Map of the British Empire in America* by Henry Popple. Printed in London by William Henry Toms and R.W. Seale in 1733. Located in David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

<http://www.davidrumsey.com>.



Fig. 2) Map of the Middle Colonies in North America by Thomas Pownall. Printed in London by John Almon in 1776. Located in David Rumsey Historical Map Collection. <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.



Fig. 3) *Partie Occidentale de la Nouvelle France ou du Canada* by Jaques Nicholas Bellin. Printed in Nuremberg by Homann Heirs in 1755. Located in the John H.W. Stuckenberg Map Collection, Special Collections- Musselman Library, Gettysburg College. (Used on Front Cover as well).

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