



THE ISLAND IN THE MIDDLE

“Mention the word Bob-Lo to anyone from the area in the last four generations and it is sure to conjure up memories, good memories. And that is the key to the island’s existence. It represents the good times, and everyone wants to be nostalgic for good times. ... As long as there are memories, there will be a Bob-Lo Island.” —Dorothy Tresness

Bob-Lo Island is 272 oval-shaped acres situated in the center of the Detroit River, actually a tad closer to Canada than to the U.S. It is longer than it is wide, three miles long and only a half-mile wide, and sits at the mouth of the Detroit River before it empties into Lake Erie—one of the five Great Lakes whose waters touch Michigan, Ohio, Canada, Pennsylvania and New York.

The island’s location has always proved to be significant; explorers navigating the Great Lakes would have to pass it, and military groups would use it as a stopping point before entering the United States through Detroit. Its first inhabitants were Wyandot Indians, sent from Detroit by the French missionaries who had founded the city in 1701. The French settlers referred to the Wyandot tribe as Hurons, which meant Boars Head in reference to their spiky Mohawks.

THE WHITE WOODS

Every Detroit schoolchild learns the story of the founding of the city by Frenchman Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac. They learn that he treasured this spot on the river as a gateway for transportation to the north and the south, and saw great promise in the abundance of natural inhabitants, the animals that would further the fur trade industry.

Where many history books stop short is in telling that successors of Cadillac established a mission on the banks of the river. They called it “Bois Blanc,” French words for “White Woods” in reference to the abundance of white poplar trees. It was here on the sandy shores of the Detroit River that the French “kept” their Indians, continuing to convert them to Christianity and taking advantage of their prowess in living off the land, specifically in trapping for the burgeoning fur trading industry. Years later when the Indians threatened to flee to Ohio where English traders were settling, a treaty was drawn to actually give the tribes islands in Lake Erie and the Detroit River. Under this arrangement, the Wyandots—under French auspices—inhabited the outlying lands for many years. The largest of these islands took the name of the mission, and became known as Bois Blanc. The Indians’ own name for it was “Etiowiteendannenti,” meaning “a peopled island of white woods guarding an entrance.” The Americans would come to call it “Bob-Lo.”

As the French presence grew along the American side of the river, other Indian tribes were also displaced to the island. The tribes were led by various chiefs, some of whom went on to make their own mark in history. The more famous names staying at Bob-Lo included Black Hawk, a prominent player in the War of 1812; Shabbona, who went on to befriend the white man in settlement issues in Indiana and Illinois; Sagonash or “Captain Billy,” the Indian son of Col. William Caldwell, one of the early settlers of Chicago; and Miera, or “Walk-In-The-Water,” whose name was given to the first steamboat to cross the Great Lakes. From 1818 to 1821, the 135-foot long Walk-In-The-Water would carry up to 100 passengers at a time on a route from Buffalo to Detroit. Her historic service came to an abrupt end on November 21, 1821, when a storm drove her ashore near Buffalo. The waves pounded relentlessly until she broke apart.

SHIFTING BOUNDARIES

Many Detroiters and Michiganders are surprised to learn that today the island is Canadian, not U.S. territory. The detailed history of the boundary containing the island is complicated and has been disputed a number of times, beginning when the British overtook it from the French in 1796, and again at the end of the War of 1812 when Americans protested the British occupation. The very first engagement of that war actually occurred at Bob-Lo Island. An American ship, called the Cuyahoga, was proceeding to Detroit carrying the U.S. Army band, wives and children of officers, mail and supplies when canoes of Indians and British soldiers just off the coast of Bois Blanc overtook it. The Americans aboard did not even know that war had been declared.

Following this relatively easy capture, the British and Indians went on down the river to capture the fort at Detroit. Riding alongside with the British was a very capable Shawnee Indian chief named Tecumseh. The Wyandots and the Shawnee had a very special friendship, and Tecumseh used Bois Blanc as his headquarters, staying there frequently while gathering troops to help the British cause.

At the end of the war, the Treaty of Ghent attempted to determine some international boundaries between Canada and the U.S., including Bois Blanc. Documents decreed: "The boundary line is to run through the middle of Lake Erie until it arrives at the water communication between that Lake and Lake Huron, thence along the middle of the said water communication." The Americans interpreted "water communication" as the navigable channel—or the one usually used by ships—while the British claimed it meant the exact geographic middle of the channel. Since the west or U.S. side of the river only had a depth of a few feet and could not be considered navigable, the Americans claimed the boundary would fall between the island and the Canadian shore, putting it in American waters.

In 1818 a Boundary Commission was drawn in to settle the dispute. The Commission negotiated that the island would remain under British sovereignty. In exchange, the British gave up occupancy of Drummond Island farther to the north. The pilot of the boat used by the commissioners to map

out the boundaries was James Hackett, a native of Scotland whose family had settled in Amherstburg. In later years, Hackett and his descendants would figure extensively in the story of Bob-Lo Island as keepers of the lighthouse.

Suddenly, as a result of the Boundary Commission's decision, the island loved by Detroiters became foreign territory. But over time, the 18 miles of waterway separating the two countries would not hinder millions of trips from Detroit to the beautiful island. In fact, the trip over water became part of the Bob-Lo experience.

Like Detroit, the British fort at Amherstburg—Fort Malden—sat right at water's edge. There was no protection, save for Bob-Lo Island sitting out a couple of hundred feet. In 1839, taking advantage of Bob-Lo's position as a defensive barrier, the British built three identical blockhouses along the length of the island. They were two-story structures made of logs, the top story projecting out over the bottom. Holes were made in the upper story large enough to shoot a cannon. This style of blockhouse was prevalent throughout the United States in the pioneer days.

When Fort Malden was disbanded in 1852, the blockhouses were no longer needed. The north blockhouse met its end in 1867 when it was torn down and used to make a bonfire to celebrate Confederation Day, which marked the unionizing of the four provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to form the country of Canada. The middle blockhouse became part of a dwelling that was in use until the 1920s. The south blockhouse withstood the island's transformation into an amusement park. In the 1930s it was a tourist attraction. Many years later it was converted to a souvenir stand. It and the lighthouse constructed in 1837 would become the longest-standing historical symbols on the island.

LIGHTING UP THE WATER

The lighthouse was erected on the island's southernmost point to help boats navigate through the narrow channel on the Canadian side. Constructed of limestone brought over from England, the lighthouse towered 56 feet above the water and guided traffic from Lake Erie through the channel to Amherstburg and Windsor. Its beacon—a 10-lamp oil-burner, with eight of the lamps facing toward the lake and two upstream—could be seen for 18 miles.