Introduction

In the mid-1840s with the onset of "copper fever," news of the copper deposits on the Keweenaw Peninsula spread throughout the United States and around the world. During the early years various foreigners came to the area to curiously inspect the scene to see if what was being reported was actually true.

In the late summer of 1854 two groups, one English and one French visited the copper region on such missions. The French group was led by Louis-Edouard Rivot (1820-1869). Rivot was a distinguished professor and mining engineer at the School of Mines in Paris. He was known for his work in metallurgy and mining, not only from the scientific and didactic view, but also from the practical point of view. He had published many scientific works in both article and monograph form.

Thus he was the natural person to lead a group of French gentlemen to Michigan. The party arrived in Sault Ste. Marie in early October 1854 and had to be portaged around the rapids because the canal was in its final stages of construction and would open in the following June. As the editor of the Lake Superior Journal writing from Sault Ste. Marie noted:

The mines of Lake Superior are attracting more attention from abroad than ever before and we have during the present season noticed several French and English parties of scientific and practical miners in the country, making examination of the mining districts, with a view of investing themselves or of recommending the rich veins to friends at home. ¹

Rivot's group sailed across Lake Superior, aboard the Manhattan, while Rivot took notes of what he saw enroute and on the Keweenaw Peninsula. He described Gros Cap on the north and White Fish Point on the south as the pillars of Hercules of Lake Superior. Naturally Pictured Rocks were duly noted with their unique geological formations. Although they do not seem to have stopped at Marquette he later wrote that the "immense iron ore deposits" at Marquette were being "exploited with some activity."

The French party first landed at Copper Harbor. They were held up for two days at Eagle River while the lake was struck by a gale.

¹Lake Superior Journal, 10/21/1854.
Rivot made careful observations of the ports they passed and their potential for growth. The little expedition ended at Ontonagon and then they started their return home.

Upon his return to Paris, Rivot presented a report of his trip to Cail, Cheylus, and Bechenec. This report was concerned specifically with the copper mining concessions of Agate Harbor, the general situation, and the Clark, Northwest, Copper Falls, North Western, Cliff and South Cliff, and the Minesota mines. The following year Rivot published his *Voyage au Lac Superieur.* This work is chiefly interested in the geology of the region. However on several pages he describes some of the Keweenaw towns and ports that he visited. In 1857 he published another study on the same topic entitled, *Notice sur le Lac Supeieur, Etats-Unis d'Amérique.*

Rivot's works are important because they provide us with a view of the developing Copper Country in the early days. Furthermore, they give us a view of the country from a foreigner's perspective.

What follows is an imperfect translation of Rivot's work dealing with the towns that he visited. I have left out the bulk of the work which deals with the geology of the district. It is hoped that this translation will provide researchers with a new outlook on the history of the Copper Country of Michigan.

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Translation of Selected Portions

(p. 20) The two promontories, Gros Cap and Point Iroquois form the columns of Hercules of the grand lake, and mark the entry of the St. Mary's River. On the south shore is the United States, one must notice chiefly:

The promontory of White Fish Point with its terraces of sand and alluvia;

Cliffs of red and white sandstone, in the vicinity of Grand Island, to which their motley appearance, resultant alternating layers of sandstone of different colors, to which is given the name Pictured Rocks.

The bay of Chocolate [Chocolay; actually Marquette or Iron Bay] River, close by are immense iron ore deposits exploited with some activity;

The deep bay, called Keweenaw Bay, to the north of which are the mineral lands;

The tongue of land called Keweenaw Point, separates almost completely the firm land by Portage Lake;

The elevated mountains, Porcupine Mountains to the west of the Ontonagon River, and finally the numerous islands in the vicinity of La Pointe Detour, and the principal port and the site of the former mission of the Jesuits.

All the western part from the bottom [modern Duluth, Minnesota] to the English possession which start at the Pigeon River, are little explored. It belongs to the state of Minnesota. The treaties with the Indian tribes to abandon the territory go back only to 1854.

The northern shore is rockier than the American side. It presents many islands and deep bays and mountains of high elevation that follow the lake.

(p. 21) Finally towards the east, the shore offers only open bays in which ships cannot not find refuge against storms.

Two islands, Michipicoten and Isle Royale merit further attention. Both of them are marked on the old Jesuit map and discussed in Indian traditions as holding native copper. This does not hold in fact, seen by recent explorations because works have been abandoned on the English island (Michipicoten) and Isle Royale annually only produces forty tons of copper.

Isle Royale, closer to Canada than the south shore, belongs to Michigan. It is placed in relationship to Keweenaw Point and presents some great analogies of geological interest. It possesses deep bays and good shelters, wide and safe ports. Its two extremities and south the southern coast, while towards the north the shore is rocky and presents sheer cliffs.

Good veins contain copper deposits, and native copper and silver. There are reports of these from the English and American
shores and on the two previously mentioned islands. However mineral exploration is centered on Keweenaw Point and in the Ontonagon country. There are two parties [Rivot's French group and an English group] in the Lake Superior country that are presenting a great industrial interest. There are those that have great interest to visit and those that are those that I especially describe.

Ports, towns and villages

It is enough for the curious visitor to note the situation of the towns and villages established on the southern coast of Lake Superior, at distances of 800 and 1000 kilometers from Detroit, that maintains the grand civilized city the more it is approached. (p. 22) Going along the coast from east to west, departing from the extremity of Keweenaw Point, you encounter the successive ports of: Copper Harbor, Agate Harbor, Eagle Harbor, Eagle River, Elm and Misery River, Onaranon, Pewaric and La Pointe.

Copper Harbor

Copper Harbor is a rather vast port, well sheltered from the winds from the north, northeast and northwest, that blows too frequently with an inconceivable violence: its entrance is denoted by a lighthouse with a light that at night is seen to a distance of six to seven kilometers.

At the entrance you discover Fort Wilkins, established in 1844 for a detachment of soldiers who were to protect the Americans from the Indians: it is not abandoned, since the Red Skins have quit the country.

The small village is constructed at the bottom of the port and the inhabitants have started clearing the land: its significance would become very large in a very short time, if the veins recognized in the close neighboring country becoming the focus of active exploitation.

Copper Harbor is now the only port established along the coast, from La Pointe, in which ships can find shelter against a storm: consequently it has the great advantage to have its regular communication with Sault-Sainte-Marie throughout the navigation season from May until the end of November.

Agate Harbor

The bay of Agate Harbor will be able to become a very fine port, its entry is easy; the water is deep to the shore in any sound; several times already ships have found refuge during heavy weather and easily disembarked their passengers. (p. 23) The virgin forests advance to the shores of the lake, and clearing of the land

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“This is incorrect. The garrison left at the start of the Mexican War in 1845 when they were transferred to Texas where they were needed. The Indians were never a threat to the Americans. It was more the case that the army was placed at Copper Harbor to protect the Americans from themselves given their violent nature."
has been hardly started by an American company, is of little importance yet.

The exploration of several veins of copper has commenced a short distance from Agate [Harbor], and if work actively pushes forth and leads to a profitable exploitation, Agate bay will soon see a rising town which will compete with those of Eagle Harbor and Eagle River.

In a country where hand work is also expensive, under a climate as hard as that of Lake Superior, clearing fertile land is not sufficient to attract inhabitants; the active exploitation of copper mines can only determine the creation of a town.

Also one sees two genuine ports on the southern coast, Copper Harbor, [and] Agate Harbor. The first hardly inhabited and the second is completely deserted. Meanwhile the flourishing towns are established at Eagle River and Ontonagon, [although] ships are exposed to the full fury of the storms.

The aspect that the establishments of the littoral present immediately indicates the important of the mines developed in the adjacent country.

**Eagle Harbor**

The port of Eagle Harbor is small and poorly sheltered against the north winds. Already an important town exists along its shores and is rapidly increasing with the development of the mines of Copper Falls, North-Western, North-West, etc.

**Eagle River**

The town that bears this name is built at the edge of the lake at the mouth of the river known as Eagle River. Already it counts more than a thousand inhabitants and its importance increases every day. It is used as a shipping center for some of the richest mines of the lake [Lake Superior country], Cliff Mine and the North American mine. The river is not navigable and the p. 24) coast provides no shelter for ships. The loading and unloading of ships is carried on a pier constructed perpendicular to the river. Also as soon as the wind agitates the waters of the lake, the ships must seek an ample one [port] and seek the shelter Copper Harbor offers or towards the west that La Pointe has. Misfortune with the buildings [was caused] because they were constructed too quickly. They are piers along the shore and they are tremendous difficulties with flooding.

The wooden pier is often destroyed by the waves. This can be seen during my stay in October 1854 when a strong gale lasted for two days. The result for Eagle River is irregular communication with Sault Ste Marie from the start to the end of the [shipping] season. The mines can count on arrivals and forwardings only in June, July, August, and September. These unfavorable circumstances are compensated by the exceptional richness of the [copper] seams

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*The propeller ship, Peninsula was lost at Eagle River in November 1854.*
of the two companies, the Cliff and North American.

Portage, etc.

Portage, Elm, Misery River, etc. are small villages located in the same unfavorable conditions as Eagle River and correspond to mines with little development.

Ontonagon

The town of Ontonagon, located at the mouth of the river of the same name, is the most important of those of Lake Superior. The number of its inhabitants exceeds 1,500 and several houses have a comfortable look which is rare in this recently settled country.  

(p. 25) The river is navigable for flat bats for a distance around thirty kilometers tot he south of the town, but navigation is made dangerous by several rapids. At the edge of the lake [mouth of the river] a sand bar impedes ships of certain tonnage from entering the river and the coast does not present any bay in which vessels can seek refuge. They must load and unload, as at Eagle River, on a wooden pier extending more than two hundred meters into the lake.

The importance which the town of Ontonagon owes is based on the many exploitations [for copper] in the vicinity. It would greatly increase if the grand railroad project, of which I spoke previously, were put into place.

La Pointe

On this occasion I was not able to visit La Pointe, the former mission of the Jesuits, whose port is used constantly as a refuge for ships during a storm.

Climate of Lake Superior

The climate of Lake Superior is very hard during the winter. This season begins in October and finishes only in May. For several months the thermometer goes below 20 degrees centigrade [below 00 F] until the mercury is congealed. The waters of the lake freeze to a great thickness, but the ice is often broken up by storms and the ice floes accumulate on the shore into virtual mountains. The snow covers the ground during these months and allows residents to cross long distances using rackets [snowshoes].' p. 26)

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'The rackets are long shoes made with wood and gut. They make it possible for the feet to be based on a very broad surface.
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