

THE GREAT ISLAND

Great Island, located about one quarter mile east of Lock Haven in the West Branch of the Susquehanna at the mouth of Bald Eagle Creek, is the most ancient and historic landmark in the vicinity of Old Town. A famous Indian Trail from Shamokin (Sunbury) to Chinklacamoose (Clearfield) ran through it, well-worn and much traveled by many tribes.

This fertile island of about 325 acres of rich, well timbered ground surrounded by the clear water of the Susquehanna River – called Otzinachson by the Indians – became a favorite rendezvous for Indians. Here they held tribal councils, built villages and lived, for the surrounding country afforded an abundance of game, the river an ample supply of fish and the island itself produced their staples of grain, and corn.

The Indians who lived on the Island in the 1700's were the Munsees, a branch of the Delawares. They inhabited 3 villages there, one at the eastern end, one on the western side and one opposite the mouth of Bald Eagle Creek, called Old Town Point.

Many well-known Indian paths led to and converged at the Island; one ran over the mountains to the Allegheny River, another ascended the Bald Eagle Mountain and led to the Juniata, while still another went to Lycoming Creek.

It was said paths met here. These were the important thoroughfares during Indian times, worn by the dusty moccasins of countless Indians.

It has been surmised that many Indian tribes visited, inhabited or passed through Great Island. An early name for Great Island was Mechek – menatey. The name is of Iroquois origin, but in 1755, the name as given on a map by Lewis Evans is Cawichnowane. There

were other islands in the Susquehanna often referred to as "big islands", but this was the most important one and the name meant exactly what it said, "A Great Island".

Chief Bald Eagle lived nearby at Bald Eagle's nest and the mountain range which cuts diagonally across the country from Muncy to Lock Haven and on to Tyrone bears his name.

Because of the significance of Great Island in the days of Indian warfare, this small piece of land was marked on the old maps of the colonists and Indian Fighters long before Lock Haven existed.

In 1756 when bands of marauding Indians who lived near Great Island had terrorized the settlers, Col. John Hambright with 40 men was sent from Fort Augusta “to attack, burn and destroy villages” and “to kill, scalp and capture” all Indians they found. Apparently they didn’t destroy any Great Island villages, for the Indians there were reported friendly, and villages were standing after this expedition. Unfortunately no record remains of the expedition except a rough pen sketch which shows Great Island

Later in 1763, Colonel John Armstrong, with 300 men of the Kittanning Expedition, marched through this section and destroyed the wigwam village at Monseytown Flats and a village on the island. Monseytown (or Muncytown) home of the Wolfe Tribe, was located on the North side of the river above upper Lockport, opposite the mouth of Sugar Run. After the destruction of their towns and some 200 acres of corn along the river, the Indians never rebuilt their homes. They stopped gathering at Great Island.

When surveyors came in 1769 to survey the Allison tract of land on which Old Town was located, a young Irishman named William Dunn came with them. His duties were those of a hunter, furnishing the party with wild game for food. The history of Great Island is connected with that of young Dunn, many stories have been handed down to Lock Haven children about how we acquired the Island.

The most popular one is that he bought it from an Indian Chief for a barrel of whiskey, a rifle and a hatchet. A footnote to this story adds that the chief regretted his bargain and would often take a shot at William Dunn from the rocky shore opposite the Island.

J. F. Meginness, in the History of Great Island elaborates on this tale. He wrote that William Dunn had a handsome silver – mounted rifle which was greatly admired by Ne-wah-lee-ka, a Muncy Chief, who lived on the Island and traded it for the fancy gun and a keg of whiskey. Pleased with his bargain he proceeded to celebrate with the keg of “fire water”. After the effects of the spree had worked off, he tried without success to talk William Dunn into giving back the Island. Both versions have been popular. Perhaps the truth was that Dunn squatted on the lands as was the custom and made improvements in 1770, which gave him pre-emption rights which were respected. After the state purchased the land from the six nations in 1784, he made proper application for it and paid the Commonwealth 30 pounds per hundred acres or almost \$1.50 an acre. This price was said to be the highest ever charged a West Branch settler by the government.

The Great Island was an important location for tribal councils. It has been recorded both in legend and in history. Representatives from a group of powerful tribes met on

the island in 1755 to discuss overtures from the French during the French and Indian war.

Large bands of French and Indians were crossing the Alleghenies to scalp and murder the settlers. The French who wanted to conquer this section of the West Branch and set up their headquarters at Shamokin (Sunbury), sent scouts from Ohio to Great Island to stir up the Indians.

During the French and Indian war in 1755, there were frequent murders among the Pine Creek settlers. Up to this time no protection had been offered to the settlers of the West Branch Valley, now the governor of the state had to pass military law and appropriate money to fight the Indians.

Eleven forts sprang up along the river, Fort Augusta at Sunbury, became military headquarters when the government assumed jurisdiction over the West Branch Valley as far as Pine Creek. Antes Fort (near Jersey Shore), Fort Horn, (Opposite Chatham's Run) and Reed's Fort (A stockade at Old Town – Lock Haven – which was the very last out post on the frontier), all became focal points for the protection of the settlers.

Additional information provided by Richard Winters .

The Indian village of Monseytown or Monseytown Flats, located North of Upper Lockport, has been a happy hunting ground for relic seekers. For many years, burial mounds as well as many fine artifacts have been found there by students from the college, business men, boy scouts, historians, archeologists, and other avid collectors.

An Indian burial ground for the villages on Great Island and the nearby vicinity was found a little to the west of Dunnstown in a grove of wild plum trees.

No one knows how long it had been used but the supposition was that it might have been used for burial for many centuries.

Graves were found also at Reed's Hill in 1820, a hunter accidentally discovered one when his dog chased a rabbit into a crude shelf of rocks. Pushing through the ledge, he came into a tomb-like place and found himself staring at a mummified Indian woman in a sitting position. Her clothing although deteriorated was heavily beaded with ornaments which indicated she might have been an important women of her tribe. Even more unusual was a kettle of European design, some bottles, and buttons with a London stamp, which were found near the woman's remains.

A Seneca Indian named William Dowdy came from the New York reservation to visit Dunnstown in 1878. He epitomized the aged Indian coming back to visit the scenes of

the past, and after seeing them, folded his blanket in true Indian fashion and left never to return. He was the last Indian seen in this part of the country.

Despite William Dunn's aspirations for Dunnsburgh, it remained but a small village, overshadowed by Lock Haven, Great Island, now referred to as the Island, became noted for its tobacco and fine vegetables - its importance during Indian times a forgotten chapter of History.

This story was taken from "Old Town, A History of Early Lock Haven 1769 – 1845"

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Dedicated to the memory of My parents Mr. & Mrs. Forney L. Winner
(Isabel Winner Miller)