

Welcome to the City of Sault Ste. Marie



Photo Courtesy of the Chippewa County Historical Society
Canoes on the St. Marys River
Sault Ste. Marie

The Anishinaabeg, which includes the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Bodewadmi (Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi), have lived in the Great Lakes Basin for thousands of years, well before European contact began in the 1600s. Baawting, also known as Sault Ste. Marie, was valued for its abundant fishery. French explorers and traders dominated the region during the 17th- and 18th-centuries until the British took control after the French and Indian War. The American Revolution changed territorial boundaries, bringing the area

under U.S. governance. However, British influence remained until the end of the War of 1812. In 1820 and 1836, treaties were signed between the U.S. and the Anishinaabeg, resulting in the cession of approximately 13.837 million acres in 1836.

The community grew through the fur trade and later benefited from iron ore and copper discoveries. With the rising demand for shipping these resources and transporting people, a canal was needed to bypass the rapids at Sault Ste. Marie. Michigan's state lock was completed in 1855 and was followed by others to add capacity. The local government evolved, incorporating as a village in 1879 and as a city in 1887. Residential areas flourished around the town's commercial center, and handsome government buildings and churches were added to the cityscape. In the 20th-century, entrepreneurs invested in the area, boosting the business sector, setting up power generation facilities, and developing various industries. A final boom in iron ore production and shipping came with the World Wars.

By the 1960s, the Sault's boom years had ended. Manufactories closed, causing the city's commercial district to decline. An attempt at revitalization using a French theme and urban renewal made things worse. Fortunately, the city experienced a surge of tourism driven by its rich history, impressive locks, and its noteworthy architecture. A Historical Development Commission was established. This led to listings on the National Register of Historic Places for the St. Marys Falls Canal (1966), better known as the Soo Locks, and New Fort Brady (1972), the core of the Lake Superior State University campus. Listing of significant properties such as the Federal Building (1977), Chippewa County Courthouse (1984), and striking churches also garnered attention.

Despite these initiatives, downtown Sault Ste. Marie continued to decline through the close of the 20th century and as the new century got underway. More recently, the Downtown Development Authority has reinvigorated the commercial center through participation in the Michigan Main Street Program that emphasizes historic preservation. With reinstatement of the Historical Development Commission, more National Register listings followed, including the Sault Ste. Marie Historic Commercial District (2020). New retail and service businesses have stimulated revitalization efforts in the walkable downtown historic neighborhoods. Tribal governments actively contribute to the community's economic growth. The current construction of new locks is bolstering shipping, and now includes Great Lakes tourist boats stopping in the Soo.

We'd like to show you around. Join us!

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