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Place mats: Calumet, Michigan and the State Capital Myth

by Emily Schmitz

The Incredible Story

Dr. Carl Sagan once said, “Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.”

This notion is evident in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where land and people are rich with a sometimes elusive history.

In the instance of Calumet, Michigan, famous as the focal point of copper mining in the U. P., vivid history is laced with a fantastic rumor.

A myth, its origins unknown, has persuaded some residents of the U. P. that Calumet was the runner-up in the 1847 relocation of the State Capital, losing to Lansing by only one vote.

And while residents of Calumet and other regions of the U. P. believe wholeheartedly that this rumor stems from fact, the lack of evidence from factual sources strongly suggests that this story exists as a myth and nothing more.

*

If you travel northwest in the U. P. along the scenic, winding highway of US-41 to the town of Calumet, you will encounter a drab village of unoccupied buildings and a few restored sandstones. To the naked eye, Calumet is empty—empty of wealth, population, expansion—but Calumet is also full—full of nostalgia for the past.

But the story that Calumet was the runner-up in the relocation of the State Capital in 1847 is problematic.

It is nearly impossible to trace the exact origins of a myth, especially when that myth has become

embedded in local pride. But after examining the historical context of this story, and finding connections to a larger picture, it is easier to come to a conclusion.

Back-Story

To create a context for this myth, it is necessary to look at the state of Michigan in the mid-nineteenth century. When Michigan was established as a territory in 1805, Detroit was the principal city and remained at the center of political and governmental activity for many years.¹ However, after the latter half of the 1830s and into the 1840s, Michigan citizens began to take an optimistic outlook on their future in regard to resources in other areas of the state. As Willis F. Dunbar, author of *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, explains, "A few men in Saginaw were proving that Michigan pine had an eastern market. A copper rush to the Upper Peninsula and the discovery of iron in another part of this area, which Michigan people had scorned when they had been compelled to accept it in lieu of the Toledo Strip, helped to give the state the 'life' it needed to emerge from the doldrums of the late thirties and early forties."² The decision to move the state capital to a new interior location was symbolic of the state's renewed effort to manage its resources from a central location.

It was also stipulated by the Michigan Constitution. When Michigan was admitted to the Union in January of 1837, the Constitution then adopted provided that the capital would be Detroit for ten years. The seat of government would then be permanently located by the legislature in 1847.

Early in the legislative session of 1847, a bill was introduced to transfer the capital to a new location.

The bill was brief, consisting of only a single section that contained a blank space for the name of the place to be selected.³ Orlando M. Barnes, a state representative in the 1863-64 session and later mayor of Lansing, said, "I doubt if any bill of the same length in this state ever encountered so many changes and motions to change. The great struggle was over filling of the blank."⁴

On February 10, 1847, votes for various locations of the State Capital were taken in committee and on the floor of the House. As can be imagined, the imminent decision sparked a controversy among legislators and Michigan inhabitants. As time passed, the battle became so bitter that no choice could be made and a deadlock ensued.⁵

Detroit supporters were seeking to retain the seat of state government while others battled for a variety of sites, including Ann Arbor, Jackson, Marshall, Battle Creek, Albion, Grand Blanc, Eaton Rapids, Saginaw, Utica and Corunna, as well as minor locations such as Dexter, Byron, Lyons, Caledonia, Charlotte, Owosso—even far-off Copper Harbor at the nether extremity of the U. P.⁶ While the bill bounced back from one chamber to the other, there was still considerable sentiment in both chambers for maintaining the capital in Detroit.

Early in the discussions of the bill, Joseph Kilbourne, an Ingham County Representative, submitted Lansing Township for consideration. However, at that time, the Lansing region was still a rough country with very few inhabitants or railroads. Explains Orlando M. Barnes: "Bear in mind that at this time, Lansing was a wilderness. The state still held a school section on which the city is largely builded. Its central location was the only other consideration that gave friends of this location ground of hope."⁷ Barnes also noted that Lansing

had “fine waterpower, fertile soil, and beautiful country” as well.

Ultimately both the House and Senate decided on the Lansing Township location and the bill was passed by an eleven to ten margin on March 8, 1847. The site was briefly named “Town of Michigan” but was switched back to Lansing the following year.

The Myth and The Truth

Calumet is not mentioned in this relocation episode because the town of Calumet did not exist at the time.

The Calumet area was nothing but shaded forest until the late 1860s. Many fortune-seeking prospectors came to the Keweenaw Peninsula in the copper rush of the 1840s, and this determined the location of the earliest communities there. However, the Calumet area lay inland and remained uninhabited because boats could not enter the Portage River from the south, the nearest water access. A ferry transported passengers and supplies between Houghton and Hancock—still several miles south of future Calumet—until a bridge was built in 1872. The Portage River was widened and deepened and a ship canal was completed in 1873, allowing larger craft to cut through the base of the Keweenaw Peninsula.⁸

Calumet also made an unlikely capital contender because of distance. The distance from Detroit to Lansing is 113 miles, overland; from Detroit to Calumet is over 600, much of it perilous, by water. And the improvement of water travel from canoe paddle to steam propeller did not improve most people's notion of the distance to the Copper Country.

No road existed in the Calumet area until the end

of the 1860s, when a macadamized road connected the great Cliff Mine ten miles north of Calumet to the county seat of Eagle River.

The harsh reality of Upper Peninsula winters also compounded the distance factor with difficult travel, requiring snowshoes, dog sled, or sleighs. Starvation and death from exposure were always a threat and loss of a provision ship, especially late in the safe lake shipping season, meant extreme hardship.⁹

Local acceptance and perpetuation of the State Capital myth also flies in the face of the time frame of events in Calumet. While the profitable mining industries did eventually make Calumet prosperous and influential, there was no population to speak of in 1847. The common misperception surrounding the stories Calumet people grew up believing is that Calumet was to become the state capital based on its wealth, prestige, and the rich and diverse population that copper production brought to the area.

Area resident Mary Maki explains: “We always knew that Calumet would have been the state capital because there was more population in Calumet than in Lansing We always tried to understand what a large place it had been at one time.”¹⁰

Although Douglass Houghton first discovered “rich and abundant ores of copper” in the Keweenaw in 1840, it would be many years before the area flourished. Census records show no population in Houghton county in the year 1845. It was a new county just getting established. The population increased to 708 five years later. The Michigan census of 1854 showed an increase in four years of about 2,000, from 708 to 2,873. By that time, Lansing had been established as the state

capital for seven years and had a much higher population of 11,222.¹¹

Community Death—Birth of Myth

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of tracing the Calumet myth is finding the point when it developed and lodged itself into the Upper Peninsula mindset. It is thought by some that the rumor began as a consequence of the copper golden age drawing to a close, with population decrease and diminishing interest in the area.

Calumet experienced extreme transformations through the years of its copper mining glory days and thereafter. Between 1860 and the 1920s, Houghton County supplied 90% of the world's copper, with Calumet expanding rapidly to accommodate the peak of immigration and industrial growth. Building began booming in 1896, population and mining employment peaked around 1910, and merchants and wealth flooded the region.

In a special industrial edition in June of 1897 (undtd, between June 3-5, p. 1), the *Marquette Daily Mining Journal* described it as “the richest copper region in the world.”¹²

Then came “the years that the town committed suicide.”¹³

After more than forty years of industrial peace, Calumet erupted in bitter, tragic experiences in 1913 and 1914. Labor strikes, tragic deaths, class discrimination and the exhaustion of the ore supply underground, all put the community on a steep slope of social and economic decline.

Because Calumet was a one industry community, its eventual fate was tied to the supply and price of copper. The Great Depression of the 1930s led to a fall in prices so severe that it was impossible for the mines to operate at a reasonable profit and many

people left the community to find work elsewhere. This trend continued after a brief resurgence during World War II. The recession of 1949 resulted in unemployment for three-tenths of the Copper Country's work force. Census records indicate a steady decline in population between 1910 and 1970, opposite the dramatic growth of earlier years:¹⁴

Township	Year	Population of Calumet
	1910	32,845
	1920	22,369
	1930	16,033
	1940	13,362
	1950	10,283
	1960	9,192
	1970	8,721

The final phase of Calumet's decline was the aftermath of numerous local and nation-wide strikes in the world of copper production.

By 1968, Calumet and Hecla, for decades the dominant company in the Copper Country, had reduced its labor force to fewer than 1,000 men. Then as more C&H miners began moving, the company promised that "it would do everything within its power to reduce the wage disparity between the Calumet Division and other copper producers."¹⁵

Then another blow: Union officials voted to strike at midnight on August 21, 1968.

Finally, after more than a century of operation and then this long and bitter labor dispute, mighty Calumet and Hecla closed its mines on April 1, 1969. *The New York Times* (17 Aug. 1969, pt. 3) documented the downfall at Calumet by headlining

the business section “End Comes in Michigan for Proud Copper Mine,” announcing that over 300 clerical workers and supervisors found themselves unemployed. The result was devastating for Calumet and the surrounding areas, for some 80 per cent of the population of Keweenaw County had been directly or indirectly dependent on C&H for their livelihood.¹⁶

The birth of the State Capital myth coincided with the death of King Copper and the ensuing loss of population and spirit.

In a poem titled “Shut-Down,”¹⁷ Upper Peninsula native Ruth B. Malgren says:

light We don't catch sight of the carbide
 Some busy miner carries.
 There's no more trips in the
shaft-house skips
 For Toms or Dicks or Harrys.

 No more dashing for the “dry”
 With joking miners tangling.
ore, No more whistler's roar, no falling

 No 'lectric signals jangling.

 We miss the sounds of the mine,
 Old sounds oft repeated.
 Can such a long tenacious life
 Really be completed?

Calumet native Arthur W. Thurner is one of the few authors to document evidence of the origin of the State Capital myth. He says, “A turn to heritage marked the 1970s, as the Calumet Village centennial of 1975 resurrected myths like the story

that 'only a single vote in the State Legislature voided an attempt to relocate the [Michigan] Capital from Lansing to Calumet.' "¹⁸ Thurner found this statement on thousands of paper place mats used in restaurants and homes in the Calumet area.

However, contrary to Thurner's theory are the memories of many Upper Peninsula residents who recall the story earlier than the 1970s. Mary Maki, born in Norway, Michigan in 1956, recalls hearing the story prior to moving to Calumet with her family in 1969.

"I probably heard the story from my dad before we moved. [My parents] were trying to explain to me what the Copper Country was all about" "¹⁹

Paul Hytinen, born in 1955 and a resident of Ishpeming, Michigan since childhood, recalls hearing the story two years prior to the Calumet Village centennial of 1975. "I probably heard it [for the first time] when I started iron ore mining in 1973. There were men from the copper mining industry from Calumet and when those mines shut down, they came to the mine where I worked. They shared those stories with me, along with other copper mining adventures."²⁰ When asked if he believed the story was created to re-establish some attention to the Copper Country, Hytinen replied, "No, not one bit."

Although the state capital rumor was probably created as community boosterism, it endured by giving Calumet people a connection to statewide status and recognition. The fervent words of those native to the U. P. suggest that the Calumet story is something more to them than a mere brush with fame. It is a clear representation of community pride. The story has evolved through the years as a symbolic window to the past, a link from the hard-working founders of early Keweenaw

settlements to later generations who did not have the heart to leave their increasingly depressed homeland, which they still saw as “God's Country.”

Because of the U. P.'s isolation and sparse population, its few hundred thousand inhabitants have become accustomed to a distinct way of life, a culture of their own. And with that culture comes a distinct blend of pride and humility, based on its boom-and-bust history. The people of Calumet found a way to connect with the village's glorious past—in defending the State Capital story—when their pride as U. P. residents collided with present realities.

Calumet and other small mining towns share a common history of bringing the Upper Peninsula to vibrant life. The past prosperity and vigor of these places may not have endured, but it created bonds with people of the present that have endured as community pride.

The fact is, the seat of government for the state of Michigan for the past 165 years has been Lansing. Another fact is, far-off little Calumet once led the world in copper production and became one of the most vigorous, affluent and heralded communities in Michigan. But the two facts do not mix. Calumet never came close to securing the State Capital any more than Lansing ever led the world in the production of anything except, possibly, laws, wind and one magical basketball player. Although proud and loyal U. P. residents will aver otherwise, there is no valid substantiation that links Calumet to candidacy for the state capital.

Postscript

The Calumet myth has no truth to it, but the truth is not most significant to some Upper Peninsula residents. More significant—tenaciously

so—is the fact that Calumet was indeed once important enough to have birthed such a story.

Arthur Thurner once wrote, “It has been said of turmoil in a community that what is needed to prevent it is to know one another: ‘When we know one another, we can live together more peacefully.’ Calumet’s strength lies there. It is above all a community. Calumet seems to have created that rare and sought-after quality of community where one belongs because common experiences of work, aspirations, sorrow, and joy transcend ethnicity, religion, and class. Never realized completely, this community existed—and exists. This is Calumet.”²¹

Notes

1. Christopher J. Carl, *A Sesquicentennial Look at the Michigan Legislature: 150 Years of Lansing as the Capital* (Lansing: Michigan Document, 1998), 15.

2. Willis F. Dunbar, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 238.

3. Christopher J. Carl, *A Sesquicentennial*, 15.

4. *Daily Mining Gazette* (Houghton), 13 January 1972.

5. J. P. Edmonds, *Early Lansing History* (Lansing, Michigan: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1944), 12.

6. Dunbar, *Michigan*, 238.

7. *Daily Mining Gazette* (Houghton), 13 January

1972.

8. Arthur W. Thurner, *Calumet Copper and People: History of a Michigan Mining Community, 1864-1970* (Privately published, 1974), 2.

9. Hoyt Avery, *Copper Country—God's Country* (Au Train, Michigan: Avery Color Studios, 1973), 27.

10. Mary Maki, interview by author, October 11, 2006. Possession of author.

11. D. C. Henderson, *Manual for the Use of the Legislature of the State of Michigan* (Lansing, Michigan: W. S. George & Company, 1869), 221.

12. Thurner, *Calumet*, 66.

13. Thurner, *Calumet*, 89.

14. Thurner, *Calumet*, 106.

15. Arthur W. Thurner, *Strangers and Sojourners: A History of Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 292-293.

16. Thurner, *Strangers*, 298.

17. Bill Finlan, *200 Years of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and its People...1776 to 1976* (Utica, Michigan, Privately published, 1975), 189.

18. Thurner, *Strangers*, 306. Place mats at NMU Archives and personal collection of Dr. Russell M. Magnaghi.

19. Mary Maki, Interview by author, October 11, 2006. Possession of author.

20. Paul Hytinen, Interview by author, October 21, 2006. Possession of author.

21. Thurner, *Calumet*, 106.