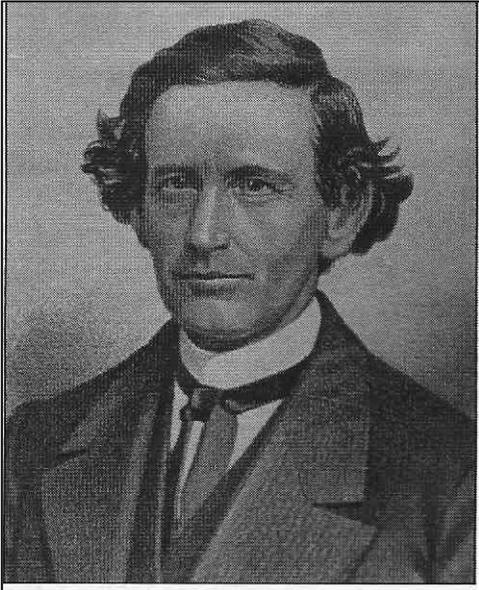


Abram S. Wadsworth

Whitaker, Amy, "Wadsworthh Harnesses a River, Builds a Town" The Town Meeting, Elk Rapids Sesquicentennial Scrapbook, Elk Rapids, MI., June 17, 1998



Until the early 1800s, northern Michigan was a vast, virtually unbroken woodland inhabited exclusively by Native Americans known as the Anishinabek.

By the 1830s, white settlements were slowly creeping northward, as pioneers sought new land for homesteading and adventurers set out to explore the last of the state's untamed wilderness.

The first wave of settlers was preceded by a small but steady trickle of surveyors and Protestant missionaries, the former hoping to lay claim to new lands for the government and the later new souls for the Creator.

One of the first surveyors to reach the Grand Traverse region was Abram Scranton Wadsworth. Born in Durham, Conn. in 1812,

Abram moved with his family to Rochester, N.Y.

At the age of 21, he came to Michigan, living first in Monroe and later in the town of Portland in Ionia County, where he built the region's first mill and dam across the Grand River. In 1835, he married Martha Northam in Washtenaw County.

Lured north:

Area historical records list 1846 as the date of his first visit to the region while passing through on the way to the Straits of Mackinac. His assignment for the government took him as far north as the Pictured Rocks area of the Upper Peninsula before he returned downstate that fall.

In the spring of 1847, Wadsworth, Martha, her brother Samuel Northam, and the Wadsworth children, Fanny, Elizabeth and James, secured passage on a propeller ship from Detroit to Mackinaw City.

From there they traveled by schooner to Cross Village, and then took a smaller boat down the coast in hopes of reaching the Protestant mission near the tip of Old Mission Peninsula.

Bad weather hindered their progress and they were forced to stop frequently to wait out the storms and secure the provisions they were unable to carry in their small vessel.

An account of their trip published in *The Traverse Region* book of 1884 described the final leg of the journey as follows:

“The next step was made at Little Traverse Bay, where they hoped to obtain provisions from the Indians. They succeeded, however, in getting a few potatoes and a loaf of bread. The party lived on fish until that food had ceased to tempt the appetite.”

A river to remember:

The weather broke and the family continued down the coast, staying close to the eastern shore until they entered East Grand Traverse Bay. On the final day, the weather again turned rough. As the adults debated whether to risk a crossing, they noticed smoke rising from the shore where a wide, rushing river emptied into the bay. The account continues:

“Fortunately, they found some Indians with an excellent sea boat, who were about to cross. As a matter of precaution, Mrs. Wadsworth and the children were put in the Indians’ boat which was navigated by Mr. Wadsworth, while Mr. Northam and the remaining Indians occupied Mr. Wadsworth’s boat.”

The family stayed in Old Mission through the winter, but being a millwright by trade, Wadsworth’s thoughts returned to the river he had seen across the bay, which seemed the perfect site for a new mill.

He bought the section of land surrounding the river and, in the spring of 1848, returned there and built a small log cabin along the south bank of the river in the area where Elk Rapids Township hall now stands.

Local legend claims that Elk Rapids, as well as the river and lake from which it flows, were so named by Wadsworth for his discovery of a pair of elk horns in the rapids near the mouth of the river.

Little was recorded on how his wife and children endured in their isolated new existence. When Martha’s obituary was written 40 years later, the author noted her only female companionship those first few years came from occasional visits by a local Indian woman who spoke no English.

Historical accounts of the time said Wadsworth established good relationships with the Anishinabek, who taught him, among other things, to peel bark from the hemlock trees that grew thick in the forests.

Time for timber:

With their help, he and Northam collected enough bark that first year to make a shipment to a mill in Racine, Wis. Profits from the sale of the bark were enough to buy the materials he needed to build a picket and lathe mill, which started production in 1850.

A year later, he sold the mill and returned to Connecticut with his family. When the new owner lost the mill a few months later, ownership reverted to Wadsworth.

He converted it into a sawmill and hired James McLaughlin to run it while he spent the next year traveling the country conducting surveys for the government.

In 1852, the Wadsworths returned to Elk Rapids and built a new home. Soon after, Abram laid out the plat of the town. Lots were sold for \$25 each, with the first two going to McLaughlin, also a blacksmith who gave Wadsworth his bellows as payment for the land.

On April 25, 1853 in a meeting at the Wadsworth home, the Township of Antrim (later renamed Meguzee and finally Elk Rapids Township) was officially established.

1853 also marked the opening of the first school in Elk Rapids and the establishment of a post office.

Postal officials apparently tried to rename the town Stevens – no doubt after an illustrious, yet forgettable co-worker – but the new designation failed to catch on and the village continued to be known as Elk Rapids.

It was also that year that Wadsworth sold the mill to James Rankin. The next spring, he started a second mill just a few hundred yards up river, but before construction was complete, he sold the enterprise to M. Craw & Co., which would reorganize as the Dexter & Noble Co. in 1856.

Tall-tale teller:

In later years, Wadsworth operated a store and boarding house at Petobego Lake.

Another early settler, Ada Sprague Pratt, recalled in an autobiography printed in the *Old Settlers of the Grand Traverse Region* of her encounter with the colorful pioneer during a party at an Elk Lake home in 1862:

“We danced a short time that evening, but soon gave it up to gather about a huge fire and listen to stories from the lips of Mr. A.S. Wadsworth, tales of personal adventure and hair-breadth Escapes told as only he could tell them.”

Wadsworth later recorded some of those tales in a series of articles for children called the *Wild Wood Stories* and published in the *Grand Traverse Herald*.

He died on June 29, 1871 in Traverse City. Martha Wadsworth died on June 3, 1896. Their son, James, founded the village of Central Lake in 1871. He later moved to Bellaire where he operated a general store and sawmill, served as postmaster for several years and was elected Kearney Township treasurer.

Daughter Fanny married the Rev. Leroy Warren, a local minister, and joined his missionary effort.

Little is known of Elizabeth’s later life, other than she married Charles Turrill of Bellaire.

Ella, a third daughter born after the family’s arrival in Elk Rapids, married A. H. Perry and moved to Traverse City. She and her husband eventually took over the Front Street hardware store started by her uncle Samuel Northam.