

## Chester Congdon and North Shore Drive

John Schifsky

The May 26<sup>th</sup> 1913 *Duluth Herald* announced, in front page bold type, the “**Land Will Be Condemned.**” An “ordinance providing for the condemnation of the roadway for the \$1,000,000 boulevard between Duluth and Two Harbors is scheduled for introduction at the meeting of the city commission this afternoon. The improvement will be the gift of Chester A. Congdon, one of Duluth’s foremost public-spirited citizens and benefactors.”

This roadway would begin between Eighth and Ninth Avenues east, follow London Road and extend along the “rock ribbed” scenic shores of Lake Superior to Two Harbors. The route would lie between the right of way of the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad and the lake. Congdon referred to this road as the *Lake Superior International Highway* and its creation was the result of a state law making possible the acquisition by the city of the property necessary for the road. In 1909 Congdon, a member of the state legislature, had lobbied successfully for the passage of that law which benefited not only Duluth but also all first class cities in the state.

The highway was not the first road along the North Shore of Lake Superior. Rich Sill, in *Roots in the Past – Seeds for the Future*, noted the presence of a route along the shore known as the “North Shore Indian Trail, an established pathway which had run up and down the shore for years.” But it was muddy and there were the frequent drainages and rivers which cut across the path, making travel by wheeled transport difficult. Canoes and boats made it much less difficult to reach destinations along the shore, even considering the challenges posed by wind and bad weather.

In June 1915 Duluth’s Mayor Prince signed an ordinance “accepting the gift from Chester A. Congdon of funds to pay the awards, verdicts, judgments and costs in the matter of the condemnation of lands, by the City of Duluth for road, highway and boulevard purposes, along the Shore of Lake Superior.” Congdon did not, as has been the popular belief, purchase the land and gift it to the city. In fact, he was insistent that the city be responsible for purchase of the property.

The 1915 ordinance also ordained “*that the land so acquired shall be forever used by the City for the purposes for which the same was condemned, and that the City of Duluth shall never use the same for any purpose other than as a road, highway or boulevard, and shall never dispose of the same or any part thereof.*” This condition, often referred to in legal opinions since 1915 and most recently in 2001, has been the guiding principle when questions have been raised about development on what has come to be known as the “Congdon trust land.”

Congdon noted, in a 1915 letter, that the strip of land taken for the boulevard was “13 miles 1043 feet long . . . to which should be added 5407 feet in the return loop at Stony Point.” Total acreage was 231.867. The cost incurred by the City was \$28,625.05 which sum Congdon and, after his death, members of his family, reimbursed.

But Congdon’s generosity was not limited to paying for the land condemnation proceedings. Mayor Snively, in a 1925 letter, refers to an agreement reached in 1922, by Mrs. Chester Congdon (Chester Congdon died in 1916), St. Louis County, and the City of Duluth in effect sharing the costs for building what we now know as North Shore Drive. The total cost of that work was \$335,425.22 which included paving, grading and culverts, lighting, a bridge at Lester River, as well as bridges farther up the shore towards Stony Point. Each of the principles paid one third of the total. In the end, the Congdon family contributed roughly \$130,000 (\$1,760,000 in today’s dollars) to the creation of the Lake Superior International Highway.

Chester Congdon’s biographer, Roy Hoover, speculated that Congdon’s work on Glensheen may have excited his interest in the environment and motivated him to efforts to preserve the natural beauty along the North Shore. Duluth was growing, the shore would attract developers, and public access might be denied by development. Congdon may well have wanted to make it possible for the public to enjoy, for years to come, the scenery and striking vistas afforded by the North Shore Drive.