

The French River Mystery Body

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The year was 1958 and the construction work on the new north shore four-lane highway was about to start. Some of the first work was to start at the Ryan Road and proceed eastward from there. The first task was to cut brush and trees along the survey line that had been laid out earlier by the engineering crew. Just a stone's throw from the Ryan Road starting point the survey line crossed the French River. As the men cut the brush and trees descending to the riverbed they made a startling discovery. Hidden in the grass and brush half way down the bank was an ancient tombstone! It had been chiseled out of local rock and the person who had made the monument also carved some lettering into it. The weathered text must certainly have been some information about a possible body or bodies that might be interred there. It appeared that the lettering had been done with a hammer and chisel too and seemed to be only the last name of some person.

The construction foreman was notified and he instructed the men to work from the east bank on so they would not disturb the site. The state archeologist was called in and an excavation was begun. Before long human remains were located proving that there was indeed a burial in this most unusual of places. On the west bank there were signs of a very old road cut into the riverbank angling down to the water. On the east bank the ancient road could be seen angling back up again from where it must have crossed the river. What road was this and who built it? A very early road, which was not much more than a glorified trail, ran from Fond du Lac to Grand Portage about 1810 and was in general use by the fur companies and local Indians. In 1854 the land north of Lake Superior was ceded to the United States government in the treaty of La Pointe, which opened the region to settlement. By 1873 this "road" was seeing increased use by prospectors searching for gold and copper. Scattered all around this area are several old copper excavations mostly from the 1860's to the 1890's. By 1879 it was reported that the "road" had been improved so that "two horses side by side" could fit in most places along the route.

In 1883 a stage road was built between Duluth and the new town of Two Harbors that probably used the old original road where it was convenient. This new road however crossed the French River above the place where the tombstone was found. This portion of the 1810 road was bypassed in 1883 and thus abandoned after that time.

The grave was positioned in a flat spot just off to the side of this old road half way down the bank. So who was this French River mystery man? A traveler who drowned while trying to cross the river during high water? Perhaps a voyageur who succumbed to the elements or disease? Maybe some early copper miner who met with disaster while searching for his "big strike." We will probably never know.

Today the site where the body was found lies under the roadbed in about the center of the four-lane highway where it crosses the French River. The mystery man's grave lies directly under the intersection of the oldest road on the north shore and the newest.