

An Introduction to *Upper Country*: A Journal of the Lake Superior Region

“Upper Country.”

Anyone familiar with early North American history, especially New France in the Great Lakes region, knows the phrase and what it denotes: The vast, remote and challenging terrain bordering the biggest coldest freshwater lake on earth.

Anyone who has lived in or traveled the Upper Country also knows the connotation of the phrase: As with the name of The Big Lake, to us it denotes not only northern-most latitude, as it did for the French in their phrase “pays d'en haut,” but also carries a cachet of environmental superiority.

But who said it first?

Probably the missionaries, but which ones, and when? Referring to natives farther up (that is, farther southwest on) the St. Lawrence River from Quebec, Three Rivers and Montreal (in the 71 volumes of the *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*), the missionaries and their superiors wrote of “upper Algonkins” (*JR* Vol. 46, Jerome Lalement), “upper Iroquois” (*JR* Vol. 60, Claude Dablon), and “upper tribes” (*JR* Vol. 64, Etienne Carheil); and “their [specific tribes'] country,” and “that country” (several instances).

In the *Relation* of Vol. VI 1633 doc. xxi, Father Paul Lejeune, S.J. writes of the “. . . murder of a Frenchman by up-country natives . . .” according to Reuben Gold Thwaites in his Preface; but Lejeune's

letter in the original French uses no phrase remotely resembling “pays d'en haut.”

Thwaites, the editor of the English translation of the *Relations*, also used the phrase “upper country” in his *Preface* (1896) to Vol. 35, 1669, but the phrase is not in the original letter written by the Jesuit Superior in Kebec, Father Paul Ragueneau.

The phrase never caught on with New France map makers. Nicolas Sanson, the “Father of French Map Makers,” used Jesuit sketches and other reports for his pioneering 1656 Map of Nouvelle France. No “Upper Country.” The Lake Superior (or Lac Tracy, after the Lieutenant-General of New France) region is designated on various other maps, including Coronelli's 1688 effort and Guillaume de L'isle's 1718 series, as “Partie du Canada,” “Haute Louisiane,” or by specific tribe names.

But “superieur” in French meant “uppermost.” So by extension, the name of the lake would apply to the surrounding country and the phrase “Upper Country” was implied, at two removes.

Implied but not used.

Cartier or Champlain?--No. The French phrase “Pays d'en Haut” described the territory north and west of Montreal, dependent on the New France colony of Canada (as distinct from other New France colonies such as Acadia, Newfoundland, Louisiana, and later Upper Louisiana—a.k.a. “Pays des Illinois”). The Pays d'en Haut was first explored by Samuel de Champlain in his 1613 excursion from the St. Lawrence almost to Lake Huron via the Ottawa River. Cartier had much earlier (1535) probably glimpsed that inviting terrain—especially wide stretches of the Ottawa River—from the high ground near the Iroquois camp of Hochelaga near present-day Montreal.

But the phrase does not appear in any of their writings.

It does occur—370 times in 31 documents—in the collections of the Champlain Society in Canada. Champlain's successors found the phrase handy, and employed it.

Among the Champlain Society's collections of the correspondence of the far-roaming Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de la Verendrye, “pays d'en haut” pops up several times, beginning in 1731.

By 1691, the insouciant rascal Antoine de Lamothe, Sieur de Cadillac, reporting from the Mackinac Straits, writes of the fur trade “. . . in the Upper Country.”

“Upper Country” had arrived.

And it stayed. Amid the debates over the controversial trade of the Toledo Strip for the U. P. that preceded Michigan's admission to the U. S. as a state in 1837, the venerable Henry Rowe Schoolcraft wrote in praise of “. . . the large area of territory in the upper country”

More recently, great historians of the Northwest Territory—Louise Phelps Kellogg, Joseph L. Peyser, Claiborne Skinner—have used “Upper Country” prominently in their works.

Once in use, the phrase got adopted for far-flung applications. Today the Pays-d'en-Haut is an official regional county municipality in Laurentide, Quebec. And in English, from high terrain hiking trails in California to grades of tobacco in northern Maryland to the route of St. Paul in Ephesus (via King James's translators), “upper country” denotes altitude, latitude, and apostolic zeal.

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Youthful zeal in the articles herein stems from their provenance. They began as term papers for

Dr. Russell M. Magnaghi in his Upper Peninsula history classes at Northern Michigan University. Supported by archival and field research and extensively copy-edited, these articles provide aspects of the outposts and inner workings of life in the Lake Superior Region. Of necessity, we focus first on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and hope for submissions from other borderlands—especially Canadian—of the Big Lake.

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—Editor