

LAKE POKEGAMA RESERVOIR DAM
Mississippi River Headwaters Reservoirs
Grand Rapids Vicinity
Itasca County
Minnesota

HAER No. MN-66

HAER
MINN
31-6DRAF
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

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I. Introduction

Location: Lake Pokegama, Grand Rapids Vicinity, Itasca
County, Minnesota

Quad: Cohasset East Quadrangle

UTM: N5233000, E455550

Date of
Construction: 1882-1885, Reconstruction 1904

Present Owner: St. Paul District, U.S. Army Corps of
Engineers

Present Use: Flood Control, Recreation, Natural Resources
Management

Significance: The Lake Pokegama Reservoir Dam is one of six
Mississippi River Headwaters Reservoirs dam
sites that are historically significant for
their association with the history of
navigation, commerce, tourism, the
Ojibway Indians, and U.S. Indian policy in
Minnesota in the late 19th century.

By providing a consistent flow of water
throughout the navigation season, the
Pokegama Dam enhanced navigation and
aided in the commercial development of the
Upper Mississippi River. The dam site was
also one of the earliest non-Indian
settlements in the region and by the late
19th century was attracting some of the
first tourists to the area. The dam had a
devastating impact on the Ojibway Indians who
lived on the lake's shores. The project
precipitated a century-long conflict between
the tribe and the U.S. government over the
damages resulting from the inundation of
tribal lands and property.

Historian: Dr. Jane Lamm Carroll
St. Paul District
U.S. Army, Corps of Engineers

II. HISTORY

The Pokegama Lake Dam is located on the main stem of the Mississippi River in Itasca County three miles upstream of Grand Rapids, Minnesota, and 344 river miles above St. Paul. The drainage area above the dam is 3,265 square miles and includes areas controlled by the Lake Winnibigoshish (HAER No. MN-65) and Leech Lake (HAER No. MN-67) reservoirs. Pokegama acts as the distributing reservoir for the two upper reservoirs in the Mississippi River Headwaters Reservoirs (HAER No. MN-64) system.

The Corps started the original dam in 1882 and began operating it in 1885. In 1904, the Corps reconstructed the dam with concrete, using Universal Portland Cement. The general construction features resemble those at the Winnibigoshish and Leech Lake dams. The Pokegama Dam consists of two earth-filled dikes with timber diaphragms filled with puddled clay. The east dike is 100 feet long, the west is 60 feet long. The dikes are built on the quartzite outcrop that occurs in the area. The concrete control structure is 225 feet in length. It contains 13 eight-foot sluiceways and one 12-foot log sluice. In 1969, the Corps removed the original bear trap gate and Tainter gates and replaced them by slide gates.¹

The Corps first erected 11 buildings at the damsite. In 1909, the Corps replaced the temporary dam tender's quarters with a new frame house. The new two-story dwelling was distinguished by a steep hipped roof that contained a full attic lit by dormers. The house also had plumbing and a hot air furnace. The

Corps also built a one-story office in 1909. This small frame structure was the most stylish of any of the buildings yet constructed at a damsite. It featured a flare hip roof and an eyebrow dormer. In 1920, the Pokegama Damsite included the house, the office, a warehouse, a carpenter shop, a blacksmith shop, a wood shed, and a barn. There is no visible evidence of any of these structures today.²

Historical Significance of the Pokegama Lake Damsite

As the third damsite in the Mississippi Headwaters reservoirs system, Pokegama is significant for its role in enhancing navigation on the upper river, as well as for its impact on regional commerce. By the time the Corps built the dam, there had been loggers at work in the vicinity of the lake for ten years. In 1870 there had been as many as 17 logging camps in operation in the Pokegama area. As at Winnibigoshish and Leech, the Pokegama dam tender worked with the loggers to facilitate the transportation of logs downstream.³

In 1869, Senator William D. Washburn, the Minneapolis miller who was an energetic proponent of a Federal reservoir system, sent an engineer to the Mississippi Headwaters region to survey for potential damsites. The engineer reported that a narrow channel at Pokegama Falls was natural damsite. Several months later, Washburn purchased forty acres at Pokegama Falls in the

belief that eventually the government would build a dam at the site.⁴

Pokegama Falls in its natural state had been a tourist attraction before the dam was built. After the dam, the fall at the rapids increased by six feet, from 15 to 21 feet, making the falls even more spectacular to view. The Pokegama Dam also attracted many fishermen. In 1910, the Pokegama dam tender complained that fishermen seemed to be overrunning the damsite.⁵

As with the previous two dams, the Pokegama damsite was the first permanent non-Indian settlement on the lake, although the lumber town of Grand Rapids, three miles away, pre-dated the dam.

Pokegama Falls had been for many years the site of Ojibway settlement. In the late 18th century there were fur traders stationed at the falls. For a short time in the 1830s, missionaries established a mission at the Pokegama village, which they eventually abandoned after repeated attacks by the Dakota Indians. In the mid-19th century, another Ojibway village was located on an island in Lake Pokegama.

According to a government survey of 1867, there were several Ojibway villages clustered near Pokegama Falls, with the principal village located at the north end of the lake on the south side of the Mississippi River. By the 1880s, however, the majority of the Ojibway who had lived in the vicinity of the falls had moved farther up the river to a bend known as White Oak Point. In 1873, the federal government had designated this 16-

square mile area of land along the river as an Ojibway reservation. White Oak Point had traditionally been only a seasonal camping ground for the Pokegama and Sandy Lake bands, not a permanent village. As the White Oak Point Reservation was situated on the Mississippi between Winnibigoshish and Pokegama, the Ojibway there also suffered damages from the creation of the reservoirs. The project inundated the hay that grew along the river and the wild rice they had traditionally harvested from Lake Pokegama. According to the Rice Commission report of 1889, there were still Ojibway living near Grand Rapids who also lost their hay and wild rice.⁶

1. Carole Zellie, "Upper Mississippi Headwaters Damsites Cultural Resources Investigation," Report Prepared for the St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers, 1988, p.67.
2. Ibid.
3. See Mississippi River Headwaters Reservoirs, HAER No. MN-64; Lake Winnibigoshish Reservoir Dam, Mississippi River Headwaters Reservoirs, HAER No. MN-65; and, Leech Lake Reservoir Dam, Mississippi River Headwaters Reservoirs, HAER No. MN-67.
4. Raymond Merritt, Creativity, Conflict and Controversy (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), p.71.
5. Pokegama Log Book, June 12, 1910, St. Paul District Archives.
6. See Historic Overview Section; 51 Congress, 1st Session, House of Representatives, Executive Document #247, "Chippewa Indians in Minnesota," p.160.