

CHAPTER 2

Finnish Americanism and Indigenous Land on Sugar Island, Michigan, 1915–1940

Justin Gage

In 1915, Finns began migrating to Sugar Island, Michigan, a nearly 50-square-mile island that sits in the St. Marys River along the US–Canadian border (Map 2.1).¹ Sugar Island had been home to Anishinaabe Ojibwe (Chippewa) peoples for thousands of years, but their lands had been persistently taken from them since the arrival of white Americans in the early 1800s. In the 20th century, dozens of Finnish families changed the island once again, continuing processes of settler colonialism. Finnish success on Sugar Island came at the expense of the Anishinaabe families there (which included transborder people of mixed Ojibwe, Ottawa, and European ancestry). With the help of federal and state programs, Finns accumulated a disproportionate amount of land in a short amount of time and used it for farming, logging, and other extractive industries, altering the ecosystems important for Anishinaabe subsistence.² With a developing economy, Finns seized the labor market, putting Anishinaabe workers at a significant disadvantage, further damaging Indigenous livelihoods and political power.

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When Finns first settled, Indigenous families still represented more than a third of the local population (which also included people of white American, British, and Canadian ancestry), giving them political sway. But, as more and more Finns arrived, Indigenous influence in the local government diminished. Finns retooled the local government to work for them, pushing for road construction that put money into their pockets. The new roads and a ferry connected Sugar Island with the surrounding Sault Ste. Marie region. By the late 1930s, Anishinaabe islanders had lost ground to the white settlers. In 1938, the Indigenous population held just 4% of Sugar Island's private acreage and 2% of its croplands, even though they represented at least 24% of the population (in 1940).³ On the other hand, Finnish-born Americans, who represented just 22% of Sugar Island's population, held nearly 30% of the island's private acreage and 35.5% of its croplands.

The ideas of the Sugar Island Finns about their settlement, on what it meant and what it should accomplish, reflected American notions of the frontier spirit and white exceptionalism. Although many Native-born white Americans believed that Finnish immigrants were racially inferior and suited for a lower-class, laboring existence in the United States, Finnish Americans themselves held a variety of visions of what their purpose in America should be, or what I call their own notions of "Finnish Americanism."⁴ Some Finns believed that their people possessed unique characteristics that gave them an exceptional role to play in American progress.



Map 2.1: Sugar Island, Michigan. Map by Justin Gage.

Among the Finns migrating to Sugar Island, there was the belief that they would prove their compatibility as white Americans and contribute to American progress by converting a wilderness into a developed settlement. Finnish-Americanism on Sugar Island supported and sustained 20th-century settler colonial replacement. The Sugar Island settlement was choreographed by Frank Aaltonen, who believed that the Finnish race, as he saw it, had “the blood of true pioneers.”⁵ He claimed that his countrymen had “never known of fear of the wilderness,” and they were “ready to tackle any obstacles in the forest.”⁶ Finnish immigrants, like Native-born white Americans, had the talent and an innate drive to conquer the land. Even though 600 people lived on Sugar Island when the Finns arrived, Aaltonen saw himself as an actual colonizer of a “wilderness.” In fact, when Aaltonen filled out his draft card in 1917, he listed his “Present Occupation” as “Farmer and Colonizer.”⁷

Even though millions of Americans were heading to cities during this era, Aaltonen was determined to create a farming colony for like-minded Finns, regardless of the desires and opinions of the local Anishinaabeg. For Aaltonen, the promise of America was tied to the land, but because of the predispositions of those already living on it, the land was not being put to proper use. Sugar Island would only benefit his community, he thought, if it became civilized through the clearing of forest, the expansion of agriculture, the construction of roads, and the creation of a ferry that would finally unite Sugar Island with the rest of the United States. By the 1930s, much of what he hoped had been accomplished.

Taking Indigenous Lands

Frank Aaltonen immigrated to the United States as a young man in 1905 and, like many Finns, decided to go to Michigan. Before his new life on Sugar Island, he worked in the mines for less than two years and then as a union organizer for the Western Federation of Miners from 1908 to 1913. Like millions of other white Americans who settled on western lands between 1862 and 1934, Frank Aaltonen got some free land from the US government.⁸ He made a 40-acre homestead claim on Sugar Island in September 1915, which may have made him the first Finnish resident in Sugar Island history. His brother Toivo claimed a 24-acre plot. The 1862 Homestead Act offered settlers up to 160 acres of free land if the settler resided on and made improvements to that

acreage for five years. Around 1.6 million families, almost all of them white, took advantage of the Homestead Act, which legally redistributed 246 million acres of lands formerly held by Native Americans to non-Natives (nearly 10% of all the land in the United States). After five years on their respective claims, the Aaltonen brothers were given their deeds. Toivo immediately sold his land to his brother. Four other Finnish families took advantage of the remaining homestead land on Sugar Island after the Aaltonens.⁹

This path to land ownership existed because of the 19th-century colonial policies of the US government, which were driven, in part, by settler demands for land. The acreage of Sugar Island became federal property after the Treaty of Washington in 1836 (although the ownership of the island was still being contested with Canada), which ceded nearly fourteen million acres of land (37% of what is now the state of Michigan) from Anishinaabe (Ojibwe and Ottawa) nations. Every Native American in those fourteen million acres were to lose their right to live there in 1841, a detail in the treaty that the US Congress added only after the treaty was agreed upon. The Anishinaabeg that remained without their own land deeds would be forced to relocate southwest to the Missouri River country. There would be no reservation on Sugar Island or in the region around Sault (pronounced “Soo”) Ste. Marie, Michigan, the closest center of trade to Sugar Island and what is now the second largest town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.¹⁰

Ojibwes and Ottawas objected to this injustice, which the US government resolved with another injustice. The US government offered Ojibwes and Ottawas individually held allotments of land in and around the lands that they lost, just 40 acres for an individual and 80 acres for a family. The 1855 Treaty of Detroit, which was also fraudulently altered by the US government, set up this redistribution and reserved 2,600 acres on Sugar Island, but it also prevented allottees from having title to their land for ten years.¹¹ From the perspective of the US government, the treaty also dissolved tribal organizations among the Ojibwe and Ottawa Anishinaabeg, eliminating their relationship with Indian Affairs and the protections from the authority of the state of Michigan that came with it.¹²

Moreover, on Sugar Island and in the surrounding area, Anishinaabeg did not receive their allotments until 1872, a decade after most of the northern shoreline of the island had been settled by whites. But, even after the allotments were made, most Anishinaabeg did not live

on their allotments. Instead, they lived near the St. Marys River, where they could continue fishing to supplement their agriculture and foraging.¹³ The Homestead Act brought more white Americans onto Sugar Island and the population grew from 238 in 1870 to 544 in 1880. Still, the island remained a rural, sparsely populated place. When Finnish Americans began arriving in the late 1910s, the population consisted of just 620 people.¹⁴ But the arrival of Finnish settlers perpetuated the process of land loss for Sugar Island's Ojibwes.

The Coming of the Finns

In his own unpublished memoir, Frank Aaltonen recalled his first encounter with Sugar Island in the early summer of 1915, as a passenger on a steamer boat.¹⁵ Aaltonen noticed the island and asked another passenger about it. The man said, "oh, it's a good size island, some Indians there, but the land is rocky."¹⁶ The answer left Aaltonen unsatisfied, so he pulled out a soil map from his pocket (which he carried because he was already looking for some farmland). The map showed that there was some "good clay soil on the island," which convinced him to file for a homestead claim (and persuade his brother, Toivo, to do the same). Aaltonen toured Sugar Island and encountered swamps, mosquitoes, and flies, but he was also proud that he saw the promise of timber and farming. Aaltonen understood it as a place that he discovered.¹⁷

He also understood it as a perfect place for the "racial character" of the Finns.¹⁸ "The Finnish people have always been a forest people," Aaltonen wrote, "bent on clearing farms from wilderness." Not just "superior woodsmen," they were also "great fishermen and incomparable hunters." He believed that Finns had carried their innate drive and abilities to the New World, where for hundreds of years, whether in the Delaware River Valley or along the US–Canadian border, they had proved their worth. The "blood coursing" through their veins made them pioneers, Aaltonen reckoned. He desperately wanted to be a pioneer and believed that Sugar Island was a suitable stage for his "colony."¹⁹ The "scenic splendor" of the area's "natural setting" resembled Finland, with its "innumerable lakes rivers, and islands." He only needed to find Finns to settle there. He would create, he claimed, "a philanthropic land settlement project."²⁰

Although there were no Finns living on Sugar Island in 1915, there were hundreds living in Sault Ste. Marie and the rest of Chippewa

County.²¹ In 1900, there were already close to three hundred Finns in the county, but none on Sugar Island. There were also thousands of Finnish immigrants and their first-generation children living in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Most were miners, who faced dangerous and unhealthy work with little pay. Workers were fired if they did not vote for the mining companies' political candidates. Strikes were put down with violence.²² The large 1913–1914 Copper Strike, which Aaltonen had worked hard to help organize, had just failed. Aaltonen wrote that Finnish miners wondered, “weren't they in America – the Land of Liberty? Weren't they free men and women? Men ... commenced to think of an escape from such conditions.”²³ These miners were potential settlers.

Aaltonen called his Sugar Island vision a “back-to-the-land movement.” He thought that a Finn was not intended for the mines where he “can't have his freedom, which his mother taught him in his childhood.” Farming would give the miners “constructive work at peace” while paying them “better in the long run.” He trekked to the Upper Peninsula's mining communities to spread the promises of farming on Sugar Island. Reino and Gene Saari, sons of early Finnish-born settlers August and Kate Saari, remembered that Frank Aaltonen lured Finns to Sugar Island with “glorious stories” about “how wonderful it was on the island.”²⁴ Aaltonen told Nikolai Rekola from Iron River that the St. Marys River, which flows around Sugar Island, made the climate mild. He claimed that, if the growing season were “just a little longer,” you could even grow oranges and bananas.²⁵ Aaltonen paid for an advertisement in a Finnish-language newspaper that said the same.²⁶ “He was quite a salesman,” Rekola's son remembered. With the “intolerable” conditions at the mines in Michigan's Copper Country, Iron River, and around Chisholm, Minnesota, it was an easy sell. Aaltonen's zeal funneled Finns to Sugar Island. Sylvia Kuusisto Hokkanen, daughter of early settlers Frank and Ida Kuusisto, remembered that her miner father and others were “glad to get back to the land again.”²⁷

But how did Aaltonen finance this effort? And what was in it for him? Although he claimed in his unpublished memoirs that he wanted to create a “cooperative farming settlement,” Aaltonen clearly saw this also as a business venture.²⁸ In 1916, Aaltonen used the provisions of Michigan Act 74 (1913), which provided state funding to railroad companies so that they would give free or reduced-rate tickets to people who spent most of their time “securing actual settlers for unimproved farm lands” in Michigan.²⁹ Aaltonen was one of seven men who

received approval from the Michigan Railroad Commission for this benefit in 1916.³⁰ The state helped to fund Aaltonen's search for Finnish settlers, which he used to increase his own private wealth.

Aaltonen also started a land company, the Finnish Land Agency, in Sault Ste. Marie in 1916 with Hans Hormavirta (who was from Sault Ste. Marie). Aaltonen claimed in a July 1916 article in the Sault newspaper, which appears to be an advertisement for his company in disguise, that he was not a land speculator hoping for great profit. Instead, his Finnish Land Agency would "serve the settler and not skin him" and "bring honest settlers upon the lands of any honest man."³¹ The purpose of his company was "the colonization of the Finnish settlers upon the lands of Chippewa county." Aaltonen promised readers that the Finnish Land Agency would do its "little best in bringing the much-needed settlers upon the wild lands of this country, who will be able to make gardens out of the wilderness within a comparatively short time." He made no mention of Sugar Island's Anishinaabe residents.

Aaltonen also claimed that 30 to 40 settlers had purchased land on Sugar Island and were preparing to move, but there are no records of any such purchases. The first Finns to buy land on the island were Hans and Aino Hormavirta, his business partners, who paid \$100 for 100 acres in 1915.³² Just eight months later, in June 1916, Frank and his wife, Rauha Aaltonen, bought the same 100-acre stretch from the Hormavirtas for \$400. But, two months later, the Aaltonens sold that land to Thomas Korpi (or Rajakorpi) for \$500, giving them a nice profit. The Aaltonens' daughter, Kyllikki, recalled later in life that her parents came to Sugar Island to establish a home and get some farmland, but they clearly profited on real estate.³³

Two other Finnish families bought land on the island in 1916: Matti Tenhunen and Elias Laari, but neither resided there more than a few years. August Saari's family started their homestead claim in 1917. It was not until 1918 that the next Finns made a purchase. Seven came that year: Oscar Siivonen, Abel Waisanen, K. O. Saaristo, Victor Wainio, Oscar Maki, Lauri Karimo, and Jacob Niemistö. Only Korpi bought land from Aaltonen. Only Waisanen, Siivonen, Maki, and Karimo made a permanent home there. In 1919, Mauno Syrjala, Christian Johnson, and Frank Kuusisto purchased land. Kusti Karpinen claimed a homestead in 1919.

Land was accessible to the Finnish migrants. Not only was it available, it was also more affordable than land on the mainland, and, in

the case of the lucky homesteaders, it was free. Most of the Finns were impoverished, but even those who settled as tenants might afford to buy land after a few years of labor on the island or around Sault Ste. Marie. Although 15 Finnish-born settlers bought land on Sugar Island before 1920, we do not know exactly how many came and rented a place, either on Sugar Island or in Sault Ste. Marie, before they could buy land outright or get a mortgage. Most of the Finnish families relied on mortgages to purchase their properties and to construct houses.

Among those who arrived on Sugar Island without buying property were Robert Koski in 1917, Oskar Aho, Ilmari Kokkila, and David Lampi in 1918, and Henry Niskanen in 1919.³⁴ Aho and Niskanen bought land in 1921, Lampi in 1923, and Kokkila in 1926. Some of these men and their families, including some who purchased land, were transient residents, working elsewhere while they saved up. Aaltonen, for instance, spent much of his time in the early years in Sault Ste. Marie for business (he had an office and a residence there) while his wife, Rauha, lived on their island property. Aaltonen claimed that about 50 Finnish families worked on the island during his first two summers there, but there are no records of that many families acquiring or renting land.³⁵ Perhaps most of them decided not to return.

The Finnish Land Agency does not appear to have been a successful venture. In November 1918, Aaltonen's agency bought a plot for \$225.³⁶ Nearly a year later, Aaltonen doubled his money, selling that same plot to Finnish-born John Aro for \$500, but, strangely, those are the only two surviving Chippewa County land deeds that the Finnish Land Agency appears on.³⁷ Sometime before 1920, Aaltonen's partner, Hans Hormavirta, moved back across the border to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.³⁸ The Aaltonens, however, would continue buying and selling land as a family. Frank acted as an agent or intermediary for other Finns looking to buy land. Jack Koivisto, one of the Finnish-born settlers, remembered in his unpublished memoir that Aaltonen was a good agent for the Finns because he could speak English and had good verbal skills.³⁹

While it is not apparent how much Aaltonen profited in that role, Aaltonen kept urging Finns to settle, even sending letters to the editors of Finnish-language newspapers across the region to spread the word. Henry Niskanen and his family, who had immigrated from Finland in 1915, heard about Sugar Island in the newspaper *Työmies* (or *Working Man*) while living in Chicago.⁴⁰ John Keko and Frank Kuusisto had similar experiences.⁴¹ But Aaltonen was not the only Finnish pipeline

to Sugar Island. Oscar Maki first heard about Sugar Island from a realtor in Sault Ste. Marie.⁴²

The 1920 census shows 62 Finnish-born Sugar Islanders, eight of whom were single men (there were 149,824 Finnish-born people living in the United States in 1920, 30,096 in Michigan).⁴³ Each of them had lived elsewhere in the United States or Canada before coming to Sugar Island. There were 23 Finnish families (including those with American-born children), 101 total people of Finnish descent. Twenty-two Finns owned their own homes on the island (11 of which had mortgages). In 1920, the Finns made up 15% of the population; by 1930 they were 23%.⁴⁴

Over a 20-year period, Finnish-born Americans acquired a disproportionate amount of land on Sugar Island. Out of the 437 property owners on Sugar Island in 1938 (not including properties owned by businesses and governments), 98 of them were Finnish-born (22.4% of the 1940 population), but those 98 Finns owned 6,322 of the 21,581 acres inventoried, or 29.3% (Figure 2.1). This statistic is even more favorable for the Finns considering that at least 115 of the 437 property owners did not live on Sugar Island year-round. Land brought the Finns profit and political influence.

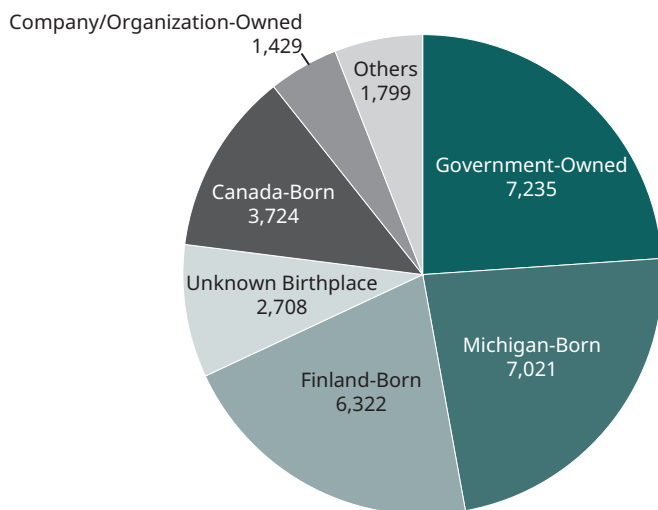
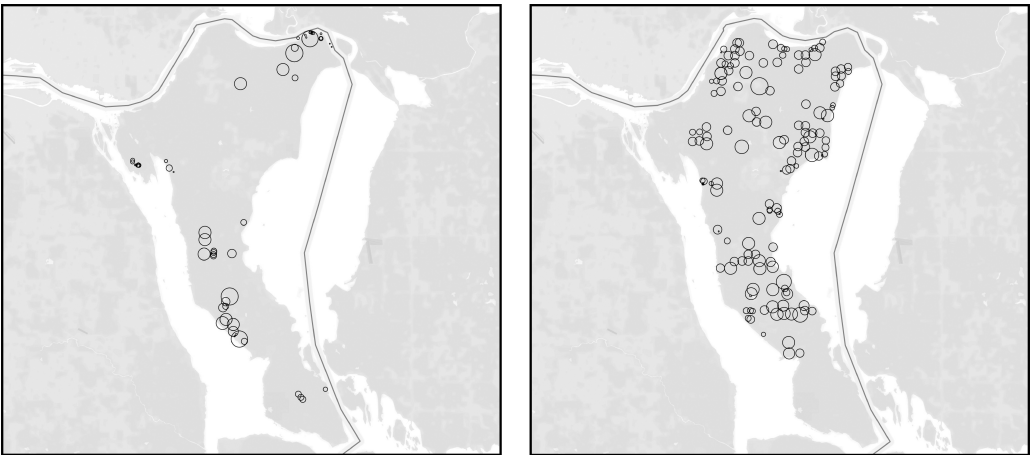


Figure 2.1: Total acreage of Sugar Island properties owned, sorted by birthplace of property owners (along with government lands and the properties of companies and organizations), 1938. Sources: “Works Progress Administration Property Survey”; US Census, 1920, 1930, 1940.

On the other hand, Anishinaabe families continued to lose acreage after Finnish settlement. Even though people of Indigenous ancestry made up 24% (169 out of 701) of the Sugar Island population (those identified as “Indian” on the 1940 census), people of Indigenous ancestry only owned 4% of Sugar Island’s individually held acreage in 1938 (this includes the 9.2 acres held by the Bay Mills Chippewa Community on the island; see Map 2.2). If you include government and business-owned properties, people of Indigenous ancestry only owned 3% of Sugar Island’s acreage. A 1938 Works Progress Administration inventory only lists 38 property owners of Indigenous ancestry. Although Finns were not entirely responsible for the disparity of Native-owned lands on Sugar Island, their intense acquisition of land in a 23-year period beginning in 1915 (and ramping up in 1920) contributed to this process. Most of the total number of deeds from these years between 1920 and 1939 have Finnish names on them (if you exclude the massive transfer of land from the former governor of Michigan Chase S. Osborn to the University of Michigan). At least 68 transactions involving Finns were made that contained acreage that was documented to have been in the hands of an Anishinaabe at some point after 1853. Astonishingly, Finns would come to own 770 acres, or 29%, of the original 2,700 acres allotted to the Anishinaabeg in 1873.



Map 2.2: Properties on Sugar Island owned by Native Americans (left) and Finnish-born Americans (right), 1938. Source: “Works Progress Administration Property Survey” 1938.

Finns bought land from Anishinaabeg directly. One academic source claimed that Frank Aaltonen “bought land cheaply from the Indians and was publicly criticized for it.”⁴⁵ Although that claim is made without a specific citation, it seems possible based on surviving land deeds. In 1919, for instance, Aaltonen paid Charlotte Shaganobe (or Shaganaba), a 70-year-old Ojibwe widow (who died the following year), \$400 for a 40-acre plot.⁴⁶ Four months after Aaltonen bought the plot, he sold it to another Finn for \$500. There is no evidence that Finns acquired Anishinaabe lands illegally or under the threat of violence, but Finnish settlement only furthered Anishinaabe land loss. In fact, it is likely that some Anishinaabe families were forced to sell acreage to Finns and other non-Natives because of the difficult economic circumstances created by Finnish settlement.

Making a Living

Once Finns arrived, there was plenty of work to be found, especially on their own land. In the early years, most settlers worked toward subsistence and finding wage work to build savings. Like other islanders, the Finns relied on fishing and hunting, particularly deer.⁴⁷ The settlers quickly learned that Sugar Island was not the garden that Aaltonen promised. Vegetables that worked well in cooler climates, like rutabagas, potatoes, carrots, and beets, were widely grown, as well as fruits suited for a short growing season, like tomatoes and watermelons. Many bought land that was wooded and rocky, so it had to be cleared before farming could become profitable. Aaltonen cleared his land and drained the marshlands with miles of ditches, often hiring help, sometimes as many as 18 men. He also started to build fences because he hoped to raise cattle.⁴⁸

Aaltonen and his wife received mortgages through the First National Bank in Sault Ste. Marie of \$2,000 in October 1919, \$800 in November 1919, \$450 in April 1920, \$1,000 in August 1920, and \$4,000 in November 1921 to pay for various properties. They had at least 800 acres on the island by 1926. Aaltonen claimed that he made 300 acres of “waste land” productive.⁴⁹ “For a Finn,” he wrote, “there is no achievement as satisfying as to be able to survey his own acres, cleared and tended by his own fingers.”⁵⁰

Most of the settlers cleared their lands as well, some built their homes (and saunas), and others bought homes. But before they could

start their farms in earnest they needed paid work to build capital. Aaltonen hoped to establish a cooperative enterprise, but the banks would not loan money to a cooperative without assets. With “no other way out,” Aaltonen claimed, he started his own lumber business to provide employment to the new Finnish arrivals. According to the 1920 census, 32 of the 54 adults were employed, but only four listed “lumber” as their industry.⁵¹ But once Aaltonen got his lumber business going he hired as many men as he could get for a time. Some of the lumber that buzzed through his sawmill were sold to cooperative wholesalers in Michigan. David Lampi cut trees with Aaltonen’s lumber outfit from 1923 to 1927, until he bought some land and started a farm of his own.⁵² Oscar Maki, who had been a logger in Canada before he came to Sugar Island, cut timber on his land, made railroad ties at his own sawmill, and sent some logs off to a veneer mill in Escanaba, Michigan.⁵³ Finns overwhelmingly harvested more timber on their properties than both the American-born and Canadian-born residents (Figure 2.2).

Finns also made a living off of the land in other ways, like harvesting ice during the winter, selling firewood, or exporting field stones to Sault Ste. Marie, but farming and raising livestock was the major industry. There were 100 farmers on Sugar Island in 1928, according to a newspaper report, and many of them were “milking cows and raising feed crops.”⁵⁴ By 1930, most Finns were farming to some extent.⁵⁵ Many fields were used for haying, as hay had become an important export before the Finnish migration. During the winter, when hay was in most demand, it was transported over the frozen lake.⁵⁶

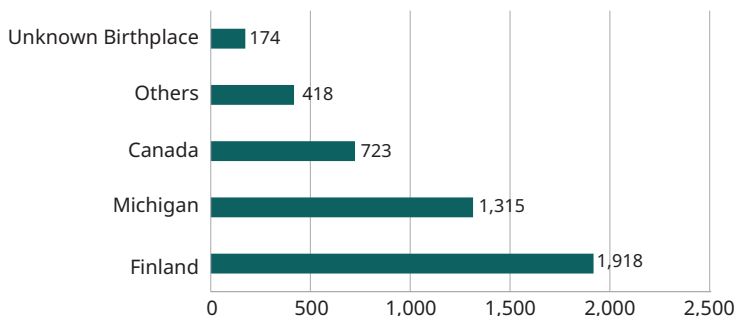


Figure 2.2: Total wooded acres used for logging on Sugar Island by birthplace of property owner, 1938. Source: “Works Progress Administration Property Survey” 1938.

Changing the Island's Ecosystems

By 1938, Finnish residents owned more agricultural property than both the American-born and Canadian-born residents (1,606, or 35.5%, of the 4,520 acres of cropland were owned by Finns; see Figure 2.3). Most of the Finnish acreage under cultivation were lands recently cleared of trees and brush or recently drained wetlands. Once ready, Finnish farmers worked the land vigorously. By 1938 they owned nearly half of all the barns, a third of the stables, and nearly half of the warehouses on Sugar Island. Finns also fenced in their lands at a higher rate than both the American-born and Canadian-born residents (Figure 2.4).⁵⁷ This fencing suggests that Finns were more likely to have domesticated animals on their properties (dairy cows in particular). Finns also had

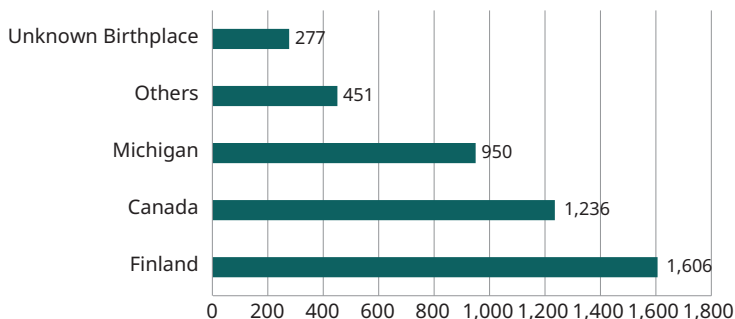


Figure 2.3: Total acreage of croplands on Sugar Island by birthplace of property owner, 1938. Source: "Works Progress Administration Property Survey" 1938.

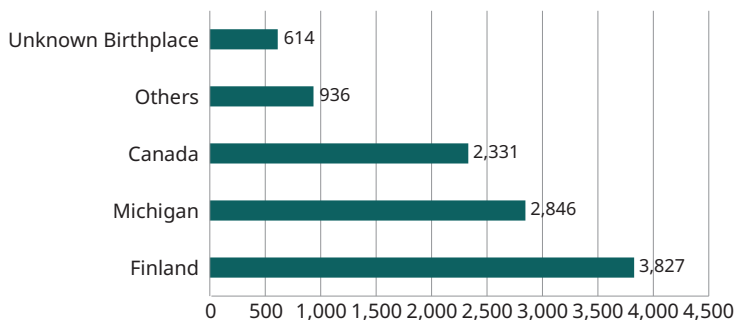


Figure 2.4: Total acreage of properties with fencing on Sugar Island by birthplace of property owner, 1938. Source: "Works Progress Administration Property Survey" 1938.

more fencing because they had more crops that needed to be protected from domestic and wild animals.

Wild animals also threatened farmers' livestock, so many supported wildlife bounty programs. Chippewa County had bounties for wild animals in effect in the late 1910s.⁵⁸ Farmers could also get compensation for losses of livestock caused by "wild dogs," which included what people suspected were wolves but were most often coyotes. Finns on Sugar Island undoubtedly supported and participated in the bounty program, which contributed to the diminishing wolf population on the island, permanently transforming the ecosystem.⁵⁹ According to an Anishinaabe man named John Andrews, white-tailed deer were not present on the island in 1900, but by 1950 they were very common, a sign of diminishing predators.

Deer populations also increase with the clearing of forests, which provides regrowth and grass and undergrowth proliferation for their consumption. While it is difficult to estimate how many acres of forest the Finnish settlers cleared on the island, they were using nearly 2,000 acres of land to harvest timber in 1938, which accounted for 41% of all timber acreage on the island. It can be assumed that logging was even more intensive on the island in the 1920s, though, before the Great Depression wrecked the housing industry. For the Finns, taking down trees was more than just the pursuit of profit. They saw it as a necessary process that would ensure their family's future. Felling trees not only provided fields to grow their food; it transformed their new piece of the world into something they thought they could manage.

Unfortunately, deforestation had an enormous impact on the ecosystems of northern Michigan.⁶⁰ The disappearance of forests was detrimental to the habitats of forest-dwelling animals. Tree loss and the consequences of industrial logging (including the transportation of fallen logs over land, which destroyed undergrowth and grassland) also led to extensive erosion. In turn, eroded soil and silt filled streams and rivers. Coupled with the transport of logs over waterways, aquatic habitats and fisheries were harmed. These changes affected both white and Indigenous residents on Sugar Island, but it was particularly damaging to Anishinaabe families who relied on the natural environment for subsistence. As opportunities for self-sufficiency diminished, reliance on the market economy for sustenance increased.

Damaging Native Livelihoods

Frank Aaltonen claimed that Sugar Island's economy had been anemic but "the coming of the Finns gave the old timers," as he called many of the existing inhabitants, "a new courage and a new hope."⁶¹ But Aaltonen's assessment of Sugar Island's economy was based on capitalist notions of production and profit, not through the lens of Indigenous livelihood.⁶² For Aaltonen, the ways Anishinaabeg lived were unproductive, which justified, in his mind, his plans to extract wealth from the land and to change the island's economy. Along the way, he ignored the negative impact "the coming of the Finns" had on Ojibwe.

Sugar Island Ojibwe, like other Anishinaabeg in the Sault Ste. Marie area, had long been acquainted with Euro-American capitalism. The patterns of seasonal subsistence that Anishinaabe families relied upon had been continually disrupted by white settlers who took and used the land and water in new and often damaging ways. With fewer acres and dwindling fisheries, Anishinaabe subsistence diminished. Many Anishinaabeg had to work as wage laborers in various industries. Some became commercial fishers, sailors, and lumbermen, and many hunted, trapped, and foraged and sold their production to settlers.⁶³

This had all been happening before the Finns arrived in 1917, but the Finnish settlers, along with the Great Depression, made work even harder to find, damaging Anishinaabe livelihoods. According to the census data, 25% of islanders (over the age of 16) who were employed in 1920 (56 out of 225) were listed as "Indian" (keeping in mind that census data does not always offer reliable information about the Indigenous ancestry of an individual). In 1930, that percentage dropped to 17% (29 of 168) and in 1940, it was just 7% (8 of 120).⁶⁴ The Depression reduced the total number of employed people on the island, but the Native population disproportionately lost work between 1920 and 1940. This suggests that there were more factors at work than the Depression in the reduction of Native employment. New Deal policies did discriminate against nonwhite Americans in their benefits, including work programs, but one can also assume that the increasing size of the Finnish work force negatively impacted the Anishinaabe population's ability to find work.

Finnish employment had the opposite trajectory of Anishinaabe employment. In 1920, people from Finnish families made up just 14% of the total employed population of the island, but just ten years later

they made up 30%. Incredibly, by 1940, those of Finnish descent made up 43% of the employed population, while those of Native descent made up just 7%. Most Anishinaabeg were wage laborers in the 1930s (22 of 29 listed as being employed in the 1930 census), doing “odd jobs,” most likely on farms or in the forests cutting timber. By 1940, only eight “Indians” were listed as being “employed for pay” on the census. There were two caretakers, a carpenter, a laborer, a dish washer, a storekeeper, and a truck driver. Not included among the “employed for pay” were the 55 Sugar Islanders who were working in “public emergency work” (for a Depression-era federal administration, like the WPA, meant to give the unemployed useful work). Twenty-seven of those 55 were Native. Only two were Finnish.⁶⁵

The dramatic shift in the island’s labor force wrought economic hardship on Anishinaabe families. In 1931, at least 11 of the 25 islanders who received money from the township’s “poor fund” were Ojibwes.⁶⁶ In 1939, a newspaper reported that Sugar Island’s Anishinaabeg lived in “great poverty and distress,” and they were trying to get money promised to them by the US government in the 1855 treaty.⁶⁷ While some Native Americans in the Upper Peninsula found work in the growing tourism industry, there were not as many opportunities on Sugar Island itself. On the mainland, some non-Natives tried to exploit both the labor and the Indigeneity of local Ojibwes. In 1936, a Sault Ste. Marie resident urged the Chamber of Commerce to hire “entire families of Indians” to walk that city’s streets “in typical Indian garb” to attract tourists.⁶⁸ It is not known how many, if any, Sugar Island Anishinaabeg contributed to such a proposal, but no one reported being in the tourism industry on the 1940 census.

To make things more difficult, the island’s Anishinaabe population was not engaged in large-scale farming, at least not as owners of that farm acreage. Of the 4,672 acres that were being farmed on Sugar Island in 1938, only 100 acres were owned by Indigenous people. Some Anishinaabeg harvested and processed maple syrup (a centuries-old practice, which is why the island was known as “Sugar Island”) and a growing number made and sold arts and crafts, especially baskets and snowshoes hand-woven with local grasses, but those were not reliable sources of income. In 1940, 26 Anishinaabe Sugar Islanders displayed their “Indian-Handicrafts” at an event at the Finnish Hall organized by Anishinaabeg and the Works Progress Administration.⁶⁹ A few years prior, the WPA had started a project meant to encourage Indian

handicrafts (baskets, snowshoes, bows and arrows, quillwork, lacrosse rackets, wooden items, and furniture) and help find a market for those products, but, even though it had success reviving production and paid the producers something for their labor, it did little to alleviate poverty.⁷⁰ Only a few Anishinaabeg appear to have been making a wage from arts and crafts in 1940 (three basket weavers and one wood carver were getting paid by the WPA).⁷¹ Others found work doing federal land conservation work during the Depression. In 1934–1935, for instance, Anishinaabeg from the island, Sault Ste. Marie, and Bay Mills were offered work in the Marquette National Forest, but, to qualify for the job, Indian Affairs had to determine the blood quantum of a man to be “at least half-blood” Indian.⁷²

The disparity of wealth between the residents of Finnish and Indigenous ancestry can also be seen in home ownership, home condition, and home construction. There were 309 homes on Sugar Island in 1938, according to the WPA inventory. Eighty-three homes were owned by Finnish Americans (81 had been born in Finland), or 27% of all homes (the Finnish-born represented 22.4% of the Sugar Island population). As Figure 2.5 demonstrates, Finnish islanders were particularly affluent in comparison to other islanders born in Michigan, Canada, and other parts of the world.

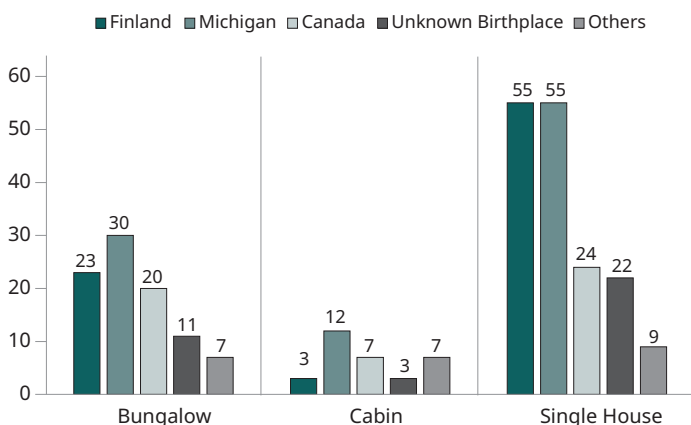


Figure 2.5: Number of single houses, bungalows, and cabins on Sugar Island, sorted by the birthplace of owner, 1938. Sources: “Works Progress Administration Property Survey” 1938; US Census, 1920, 1930, 1940.

People of Indigenous ancestry owned just 13.6% of the homes in 1938, even though they represented 24% of the population in 1940. Ojibwe-owned homes were also generally in poorer condition than homes owned by white islanders. Twenty-one percent of whites had houses in poor condition, compared to 32% for Ojibwes. Among whites, Finnish-owned homes were in the best condition (and newer, of course). Although the WPA inventory does not indicate the individual who built each home, it does indicate when the homes were built.⁷³ Fifty-four percent (22 of 41) of Ojibwe-owned homes were built after 1920, compared to 77% (63 of 82) of Finnish-owned homes (there is no date listed for one of the Anishinaabe homes and six of the Finnish homes).

Also important, in 1920, 18% of the heads of households (permanent residents) who owned their homes were Ojibwe, according to the census. It remained 18% in 1930 but dropped to 16% in 1940. Finns represented 23% of the heads of households who owned their homes in 1920, 36% in 1930, and 34% in 1940. (See Table 1.) Anishinaabeg rented their homes at a much higher rate than the Finns. In 1920, 32% of the heads of households who rented their homes on Sugar Island were Ojibwe. By 1930, the rate had decreased to 18%, but it skyrocketed to 44% by 1940. For the Finns, they represented just 2% of all renters in 1920, 3.5% in 1930, and 6% in 1940. (See Table 2.)⁷⁴

Table 2.1: Ethnicity of heads of households who owned their homes on Sugar Island as a percentage of all heads of households. Sources: US Census, 1920, 1930, 1940.

Ethnicity	1920	1930	1940
<i>Anishinaabe</i>	18%	18%	16%
<i>Finnish</i>	23%	36%	34%

Table 2.2: Ethnicity of heads of households who rented their homes as a percentage of all heads of households who rented their homes. Sources: US Census, 1920, 1930, 1940.

Ethnicity	1920	1930	1940
<i>Anishinaabe</i>	32%	18%	44%
<i>Finnish</i>	2%	3.5%	6%

Political Power and Aaltonen's Notions of Indigeneity

As a new citizen of Sugar Island, Aaltonen's initial concern was the infrastructure, especially the roads. He and the other Finns knew that roads had to be built on Sugar Island if their produce (and other products, like lumber) was going to make it to a market. Gene Saari remembers that when his family arrived in 1917 "there were no roads to speak of"; they "had to follow deer trails from one place to another." Man-powered transportation was the only practical means during much of the winter.⁷⁵ Some farmers used special skis made by brothers Lauri and August Karimo for carrying heavy loads (Lauri had represented Finland in the 1912 Olympics as a hurdler).⁷⁶

Road construction was the major political concern on Sugar Island until the 1930s. In August 1917, Aaltonen asked the Chippewa County Board of Supervisors to improve what is now called 7 Mile Road. He had spent \$75 of his own money to fix up the road, but the Sugar Island Township Board had refused to refund him with a tax rebate.⁷⁷ Aaltonen saw the reluctance in the community to spend money on roads as a political problem. The new Finnish settlers wanted roads to improve their economic output, but, according to Aaltonen, the old inhabitants did not want higher taxes.

Because Sugar Island was a township, its residents voted on most major issues, which gave Anishinaabe residents the most political power on the island. Many of the Finnish migrants, like Aaltonen, were naturalized US citizens, but not all, which meant they could not yet vote or run for office. Aaltonen knew that, in order to get roads built, he had to convince the Native swing vote. Especially important were the island's "old timers ... of various racial origin," as he called them, who were not sure that better transportation was necessary or worth the higher taxes. Aaltonen visited the homes of these old timers to convince them that the benefits of new roads, and even a ferry, outweighed the risk of higher taxes.⁷⁸

By the spring of 1918, Aaltonen had convinced enough people to elect him as township supervisor, which was comparable to a city mayor. Aaltonen's ability to persuade put Finnish-led priorities into actions. As the township supervisor, Aaltonen was also on the Chippewa County Board of Supervisors, which set the political agenda and expenditures of the county-at-large. Nevertheless, getting roads built

was still difficult. He had to convince the County Board to appropriate county funds for Sugar Island's road construction and maintenance, which he was able to do slowly. The first year he got just \$500 and \$500 the next. In 1920, the county provided \$2,500 to Sugar Island's road budget, which birthed a burgeoning road construction industry.

Finnish settlers, who were the main advocates for new and improved roads, took advantage of growing road expenditures. Locals became the overseers of three local road districts and local workers built the roads and drainage ditches, maintained the roads, and repaired them. Between 1920 and 1940, a total of 25 Finns worked in road construction, but plenty of other islanders made money working on the roads as well.⁷⁹ Oscar Aho and Charles Lahti became the first overseers of Road District No. 1 and No. 3 respectively in 1919. Aho then won the bid for a contract to build Baie de Wasai Road (for \$175.50) and LeCoy Road (with Waino Soini for \$625) in 1921. Eleven other Finns all received contracts that year as well.⁸⁰ That put a total of \$4,222.50 of public money into the pockets of Finnish American settlers in just one year. Furthermore, because these men were working on roads that usually connected directly to their respective properties, they were getting paid to make it easier to get their own crops, timber, and manufactured goods to a market. The construction also benefitted those who could provide materials for road construction.⁸¹ The gravel industry on the island, especially, was bolstered.⁸² Frank Aaltonen happened to be one of those who sold gravel to the township. He received \$19.50 for 13 loads of his gravel in 1929, for instance.⁸³ Because road construction put money into the pockets of the suppliers, contractors, and laborers alike (who were commonly Anishinaabeg and other non-Finnish residents), there were incentives for voters to keep construction funded.⁸⁴

Despite early successes with road funding, Aaltonen complained that he had to "win as many of the [Ojibwes] as possible" to his "good roads" campaign, year after year.⁸⁵ He claimed that those he called "pure" blood Ojibwes helped his side "in many a bitter fight." Those of French and Indigenous ancestry always opposed Aaltonen and road construction, he claimed, and "no trick was too low for them to play." Aaltonen's relationships with Ojibwes, along with his political strategies in dealing with them, were based on his racialized notions of Indigeneity. His worldview was shaped by racism. He was not pleased with his daughter's marriage to an Irish American, for instance, because he "did not feel that the racial mixture was desirable, but there was nothing I

could do.”⁸⁶ Aaltonen’s misconceptions about so-called racial mixing formed his understanding of his Indigenous neighbors. “There were several kinds of Indians,” he explained in his memoir. In the southern part of Sugar Island were the Anishinaabeg who were “on the whole ... honest Indians, friendly and peaceful and gave no trouble whatever” to the Finns.⁸⁷ These were Indians he considered “pure blood.” Another group were the “‘mixed breed’ Indians, mixed with French-Canadian blood.” Aaltonen loathed them as “revengeful, vindictive, and dishonest” and “more like slum dwellers” than Indians. They were hostile to the Finns, according to Aaltonen, and always opposed their progress. Admitting that he never got close to them, Aaltonen guessed that they had a “peculiar psychological twist” caused by “their characterization as ‘half-breeds’” and their inability to belong to either white or Native society.⁸⁸

The third group of Native Americans on the island were of Scottish and Native descent.⁸⁹ Aaltonen noted that the McCoys were initially suspicious of the Finns, but gradually, and not “easily,” they warmed up. Aaltonen described them as having “little of the Indian influence,” meaning that they were “good folks ... good workers, lived in good houses and led decent family lives.”⁹⁰ He believed that they had a higher standard of living than the “real Indians or the French-Indian half-breeds.” Because Aaltonen saw them as superior, he treated them differently, and “made every effort to gain” their “friendship.”⁹¹

Aaltonen was not reelected as supervisor in 1923, perhaps, he claimed, because he missed the township nominations meeting because of bad weather. The road budget was reduced during the three years without a Finnish supervisor. In March 1926, Aaltonen ran again and initially lost 52 votes to 35, but in a bizarre, and mysterious, series of events, a recount found that Aaltonen actually won 90 to 35. Even though Aaltonen won again in 1927 and 1928, his elections were always close, indicating that the political atmosphere on the island (along with the road construction his allies were supporting) was contentious. Moreover, although most Finns supported the roads, they were not unified politically. Finnish men (women were not yet running for office on Sugar Island, although they were allowed to) ran for office on different party tickets, one led by Aaltonen and another led by Aaltonen’s opponent for supervisor (who was always a non-Finnish white man). Men of Indigenous ancestry appeared on both tickets, but never for township supervisor.

Aaltonen's administration oversaw 75 miles of road construction during his seven years in office, but those roads were not connected to the mainland and the city of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. Only a ferry service would make Sugar Island "a part of the United States," according to Aaltonen.⁹² To fight for the funding of a ferry, Aaltonen became the Sugar Island Township representative on the Chippewa County Board of Supervisors. Years went by before the county approved a modest appropriation, but in 1927 a ferry was completed.⁹³ Aaltonen remembered that the island "turned out to celebrate" their "union" with the US, the "people were happy and their automobiles were rolling in all parts of the island." For an indication of how much Finns celebrated the automobile, and an indication of their general wealth in relation to other Sugar Islanders, 19 Finnish families owned a garage in 1938, nearly half of all the garages on the island. Just two Anishinaabeg owned a garage that same year.⁹⁴

In 1928, Aaltonen guided the last major road funding initiative until after WWII. A major township road bond was approved by voters, worth \$10,000. Thirteen of the 29 petitioners to initiate the special road bond election were Finnish Americans. Aaltonen's time on Sugar Island, however, was coming to an end. After holding the office of supervisor for seven nonconsecutive years, serving on numerous boards and committees, even doing minor tasks like compiling the list of dogs and their owners on the island, Aaltonen prepared to move his family to Fitchburg, Massachusetts, to work for a Finnish cooperative. In his memoirs, Aaltonen claims that he had done all he could on Sugar Island, "the new settlers were on their feet, owning substantial debt-free farms and no longer needed me."⁹⁵ He also admitted that his business "was not doing so well." He blamed it on his family doing too much for the other Finns who had followed him there, to make it "an inhabitable place." His resources were "strained," he remembered, and deed records do show that he had to foreclose on a number of properties that were under mortgage by First National Bank in Sault Ste. Marie in early 1926.⁹⁶ Aaltonen wrote that his lumber business was not making any money, especially as the economy worsened for America's lumber and agriculture industry (years before the infamous 1929 New York Stock Exchange crash).⁹⁷

In his memoir, Aaltonen does not mention other factors that probably had some bearing on his decision to leave. Unsurprisingly, Aaltonen was remembered by Jack Koivisto, a fellow settler, as being a

lousy farmer who “wanted to portray himself as a gentleman,” working behind his desk in his office in Sault Ste. Marie and hiring out farm laborers and foremen, rather than tending to his own land.⁹⁸ This was why, Koivisto claimed, Aaltonen’s farm “decayed.”

Also, politics continued to divide the Sugar Island community, which undoubtedly motivated Aaltonen’s exit. Elections were so close on Sugar Island in the 1920s that their results were often contested. A tense political atmosphere also pervaded the Finnish community. In 1928, Emil Hytinen assaulted Aaltonen after a Sugar Island Farmers’ Club meeting.⁹⁹ A newspaper report suggests Hytinen, who had political ambitions of his own, might have been upset with Aaltonen’s nomination for township supervisor. Hytinen was an experienced wrestler; Aaltonen was not.¹⁰⁰ Hytinen would soon lose his bid for reelection as justice of the peace, but only by nine votes. He would also go on to serve as a county sheriff for many years, so it seems many islanders did not fault Hytinen for his violent encounter with Aaltonen.¹⁰¹

Aaltonen would not seek the 1929 nomination for township supervisor as tensions with Hytinen continued.¹⁰² Hytinen was a conservative—he would go on to campaign for Republicans—and Aaltonen was a socialist, although he did not consider himself a radical. Finnish American communities across the United States and Canada experienced political divisions.¹⁰³ There is not much evidence, however, that Sugar Island’s Finnish families were strictly divided as “Red Finns” or “Church Finns” like other, larger, Finnish immigrant communities in the United States.¹⁰⁴ Still, the 1929 election on Sugar Island was especially controversial. A judge determined that 23 absentee ballots that favored Aaltonen’s candidates for the Progressive Party ticket were illegally cast because those 23 voters were in good health on election day. The judge overturned the election results, giving the victory to 11 township officers from the People’s Party ticket. Aaltonen and his party claimed that the absentee ballots had to be cast because bad road conditions “made it impossible for them to get to the polls.”¹⁰⁵

Political division on the island was apparent, but what about personal relations between the Finnish settlers and Anishinaabe residents? Late in his life, Gene Saari claimed that in the “old days” the Finns, Ojibwes, and the rest of Sugar Island associated with each other. “They were, by necessity, one group of people as a whole,” he remembered.¹⁰⁶ But, outside of settler recollections, it is difficult to know just how much Finnish and Anishinaabe neighbors interacted in meaningful

ways. Anecdotally, there are indications that Finns and Anishinaabeg had their conflicts. In 1938, for instance, three Ojibwe residents (two men and one woman) were found guilty of assaulting two Finnish-born men in their fifties. The newspaper accounts of the alleged attack are sparse, but, according to one of the Finnish men, he was hit in the back with a car crank while his friend was attacked.¹⁰⁷ The judge gave the Ojibwes 15-day jail sentences. There is no explanation in the report as to why the incident occurred, and there is evidence that the Anishinaabe family involved had friendships with Finns, but it is clear that relations between the Finnish settlers and the Anishinaabe residents were not always tranquil.¹⁰⁸ This 1938 incident, though, occurred more than 20 years after Finnish settlement began.

Other hints about Finnish and Anishinaabe relations come from a work of fiction. In 1929, Florence McClinchey, a white, part-time resident of Sugar Island, published a novel called *Joe Pete*, which was set on Sugar Island.¹⁰⁹ It tells the story of an Ojibwe boy, the title character, and his mother Mabel and the ways that white Sugar Islanders, especially some Finns, cheated and mistreated Anishinaabe residents, even violently, for profit, for pleasure, and to erase Indigenous ways of life. The main antagonist is Uno Jaakola, a brutish, greedy logger and land speculator. Mabel, Joe, and other Anishinaabeg struggle through poverty and the assaults on their culture. McClinchey, who claimed she became “friends with the Indians,” supposedly based her story on her real-life observations of Sugar Island and its personalities, although it is difficult to judge the measure of reality.¹¹⁰ Some have speculated that Jaakola is based on Frank Aaltonen. Aaltonen did leave the island the same year as the publication.¹¹¹

As complicated as Finnish-Anishinaabe relations may have been, people from both groups undoubtedly interacted in social gatherings. Surviving photographs show multiethnic gatherings including Anishinaabeg at Finn Hall, or the Farmers’ Hall, which was built in 1925. It hosted community meetings, music and dancing (perhaps the main purpose for its construction), theater, sports, political meetings (usually leftist), and other events.¹¹² Finnish Halls were established in every Finnish community in Michigan and typical in both the United States and Canada. Sugar Island’s Finn Hall became a common gathering place for all islanders for decades, it seems, although each community center (Wilwalk, Baie De Wasai, Payment) had their own venues for entertainment.

There are also clues gleaned from society write-ups in the Sault newspaper that the Finns may have, more often than not, socialized among themselves (either on their own accord or as the non-Finns wanted it).¹¹³ Some American-born residents were undoubtedly suspicious of the political ideologies of the Finnish residents. Finns throughout the US experienced discrimination because of their beliefs, particularly in the interwar years.¹¹⁴ Aaltonen's activities as a labor organizer earned him an FBI file and even surveillance of his movements in 1918, after he had settled on Sugar Island.¹¹⁵ There were plenty Finnish socialists on Sugar Island and more than a few communists. In 1938, the Upper Peninsula Veterans of Foreign Wars Council declared that Sugar Island had one of the two most active units of the American Communist Party in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

By the end of the 1930s, there were new efforts to attract tourists and summer residents to Sugar Island. There were several resorts and shoreline developments planned and a Sugar Island Chamber of Commerce had been formed. The new ferry was making a difference. Frank Aaltonen anticipated the promise of summer tourism. He claimed that he knew Sugar Island would become “a playground for thousands of people” as soon as some roads were built.¹¹⁷ Although “thousands” was an overestimate, many more summer homes were built along the shoreline in the years after the ferry arrived. Tourists and summer residents became an important market for the island's farmers and gardeners. John Orasmaa operated “Hay Point Shores,” where tourists could lodge, get “excellent home cooking,” and experience a Finnish sauna.¹¹⁸

Anishinaabe residents were used to attract tourists; in a 1941 advertisement Sugar Island called itself the “Last, Best Land of Hiawatha with its friendly Ojibways.”¹¹⁹ They were promoting the island's natural setting, its “rolling landscapes,” “good fishing,” and its unique claim to be the “forest home of 300 Ojibway Indians.” Anishinaabeg were portrayed as being a part of the wilderness, and, like the rest of Sugar Island's natural environment, they were surviving the changes wrought by settler progress.

In 1938, Frank Aaltonen gave a speech at an event celebrating the 300th anniversary of the New Sweden Colony (Delaware River Settlement), which involved Finnish settlers. Finnish Americans across

You Must See

SUGAR ISLAND

The Last, Best Land of Hiawatha
with its friendly Ojibways

An island gem, 20 miles long, with rolling landscapes, good roads, and miles of big sugar maples.

Sugar Island is the forest home of 300 Ojibway Indians. Their WPA Indian Arts and Crafts Project at Willwalk attracts crowds of vacationists. No charge, visitors welcome.

Good fishing, too, northern and wall-eyed pike, jumbo perch, muskellunge.

Several cabin groups. Farmhouse rooms available with dining facilities overlooking the river and lovely Lake George. Boats and guides.

Frequent ferry service from nearby Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

See Page 75 for Sugar Island Ferry Schedule

E. E. PETERMAN & SONS — **SOO, MICH.**
Tel. 2427

Figure 2.6: Sugar Island advertisement, in 1941's *The Lure Book of Michigan's Upper Peninsula*, published by the Upper Peninsula Development Bureau of Michigan.

the country celebrated the tercentenary, as it gave them claim among the earliest of European colonizers. Aaltonen told the crowd that he, like “every Finn,” had the “inner urge” to “build something” in the “wilderness.”¹²⁰ Ignoring the truth of his failings as a farmer, he claimed that he had “carved an American farm out of the wilderness and made 300 acres of American waste land in northern Michigan productive and capable of sustaining human life.” There was no mention of Indigenous people in his speech and no mention of his Anishinaabe neighbors.

Although it is uncertain how many acres of forest were cleared by Finnish settlers or the exact length of fencing they constructed, the Finns worked to change the island’s rolling landscape to make it suitable for farming. These changes included the construction of roads, the mileage of which increased dramatically because of the political influence of the Finnish settlers. Frank Aaltonen thought that Sugar Island’s Anishinaabe population was indifferent about the changes the Finns were making to the island. The Anishinaabeg “felt,” Aaltonen wrote in

his memoir, that the “schools, roads, and bridges ... were a good thing for the country, but they and their ancestors had gotten along without those things for centuries and they could get along without them.”¹²¹

His contradictory opinion, that “the Indians” thought that change was “good” but unnecessary, mirrors the misguided ideology of 19th-century white settlers who thought that their contributions to the so-called wilderness were undeniably beneficial, even moral, and Native American resistance to those things came from ignorance and tradition, not a rational understanding. According to Aaltonen, the Anishinaabeg were only interested in something “more immediate and direct,” whether or not the Finns “would bring ‘some work’ to the island.” He thought they “were perfectly willing to forget tomorrow if they could get something to eat today.”¹²²

Sugar Island Anishinaabeg lost additional lands, lost political power, and experienced assaults on their livelihoods. But, even though Anishinaabe islanders knew what they had lost and what they were losing, they remained committed to making tomorrow better, not forgetting it, as Aaltonen claimed. Even though most of their lands had been lost, Sugar Island Ojibwes began organizing in the 1930s to preserve their sovereignty and expose the injustices of US colonialism. Sault-area Ojibwes, which included those on Sugar Island, had been living without any protections from the US government, without any of their lands held collectively as a protected reservation, and without tribal recognition from the US government. In 1937, the US government finally recognized the Indians living in eastern Upper Peninsula as part of the Bay Mills Indian Community (a reservation was established at Bay Mills west of Sault Ste. Marie and 9.2 acres was reserved on Sugar Island), while in the 1950s a committee was formed to represent Sugar Island Anishinaabeg in a discussion with the Office of Indian Affairs.¹²³ Because the Sugar Island and Sault Ste. Marie Anishinaabeg were so distant from Bay Mills, and because Bay Mills had not provided services to the Sugar Islanders, they formed the “Original Bands of Chippewa Indians and Their Heirs” in December 1953. This began their 20-year fight for federal recognition as a tribe separate from the Bay Mills Indian Community. The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, which includes Sugar Island Ojibwes, was granted federal tribe status in 1972 and a constitution was adopted in 1975.¹²⁴ There are now 44,000 members of the expansive and active Sault Tribe.

Notes

- 1 This chapter was supported by the Kone Foundation Grant for the HUMANA-project.
- 2 Anishinaabeg is the plural form of Anishinaabe. The Anishinaabeg are a group of culturally and linguistically related Indigenous peoples from the Great Lakes region that includes Ojibwe (Chippewa), Ottawa (Odawa), Potawatomi, Nipissing, and Mississauga people. Sugar Island Anishinaabeg are largely of Ojibwe ancestry and Ojibwe-Ottawa ancestry.
- 3 “Works Progress Administration Property Survey”; US Census, 1940. This study uses data from the Works Progress Administration’s Rural Property Inventory, property records, and the US census. During the Great Depression, the Work Progress Administration (a massive New Deal federal program) in cooperation with the Michigan State Tax Commission, conducted a property survey, employing 2,000 surveyors, appraisers, and engineers. The Michigan State Tax Commission realized that they did not have much data on the rural property in the state, potentially leaving tax revenue unassessed. The project was massive, there were over 1,200 townships to be surveyed, and it took several years (1935–1942) to complete. Surveyors noted the buildings on properties (giving details on their size in square feet, the year they were built, the type, the type of exterior and interior materials, their condition, even a drawing of the floor plan and more), what crops were being grown, what trees were growing and if they were being harvested, what the land looked like (swamps, lakes, ridges, etc.), and if the property had fences, silos, barns, access to roads and communication, or even a school district. There are 828 properties included in the inventory of the Sugar Island Township (in Chippewa County). Each property is detailed on the front and back of an 8×10-inch sheet. Some surviving surveys can be found at the Michigan State Archives or sporadically in county archives. The Sugar Island survey was preserved by the Sugar Island Township and can be accessed at the Chippewa County Historical Society. For more, see Westphal, Alban and Ries, “Accuracy.”
- 4 For the history of Finnish immigration to North America and Michigan, see Holmio, *History of the Finns in Michigan*; Kaunonen, *Finns in Michigan*; Kostiainen, *Finns in the United States*; Wargelin, *Americanization of the Finns*.
- 5 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 25.
- 6 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 25.
- 7 “Frank Adolph Aaltonen Draft Registration Card.”
- 8 Aaltonen was born in Hämeenlinna, Finland on September 23, 1886 (he lists 1884 on his First World War draft card, 1886 in his résumé and memoir). His wife, Rauha, whom he married in 1906 in Michigan, was born in Laukaa, Finland, and was a dressmaker. See “Frank Aaltonen Personal Experience Record”; “Kyllikki Aaltonen Mullarkey Questionnaire.”
- 9 Hans Hormavirta’s application for an 80-acre homestead on Sugar Island was denied in 1916. The 80 acres were given to Edward Bouley, of Anishinaabe ancestry, instead, see *Proceedings of the Public Domain Commission*, 661.
- 10 A reservation was created for the Bay Mills Indian Community, which at the time included Sault Ste. Marie and Sugar Island Chippewas, after the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. See Cleland, *Place of the Pike*.

- 11 For information on the Detroit Treaty and forged Ojibwe signatures, see Bellfy, *Three Fires Unity*, 131–33.
- 12 Federal recognition was not restored to the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, which includes Sugar Islanders, until 1972. The tribe fought for years to have their treaty rights restored.
- 13 Cleland, *Place of the Pike*, 37.
- 14 At least 24 of those 620 residents were Ojibwe men and women who were alive in 1872. At least two of them were alive during both the 1855 and 1836 treaty processes; see 1920 US Census.
- 15 Aaltonen wrote his memoir in 1938–1939 for the author Louis Adamic, who was using Aaltonen as a Finnish source for his book on American immigrants, *From Many Lands* (1940). Because Aaltonen's memoir verges on exaggeration and self-aggrandizement, it should be read with a critical eye. Perhaps because of Aaltonen's enthusiasm for the Finnish people, Adamic portrays Finnish Americans in a favorable light in *From Many Lands*, "one of his most favorable of any of the immigrant groups he has researched," according to an Adamic biographer. See Shiffman, *Rooting Multiculturalism*, 72.
- 16 "Frank Aaltonen Memoir," 24.
- 17 "Frank Aaltonen Memoir," 24.
- 18 "Frank Aaltonen Memoir," 25.
- 19 Aaltonen was aware of the negative ideas Americans had about the imagined Finnish racial characteristics. Leading American racial theorists believed Finns belonged in a lesser racial category, unlike Scandinavians, because they were corrupted by "Mongolian," eastern Asian blood. See Kivisto and Leinonen, "Representing Race."
- 20 "Frank Aaltonen Personal Experience Record."
- 21 Holmio, *History of the Finns in Michigan*, 155–61.
- 22 Holmio, *History of the Finns in Michigan*, 273–303; Saramo, "Capitalism as Death."
- 23 *Evening News* (Sault Sainte Marie, MI), July 15, 1916.
- 24 *Evening News* (Sault Sainte Marie, MI), November 11, 1981.
- 25 *Upper Peninsula Today*, Summer 1983, 15; Swanson, *Sokeri Saari*, 3.
- 26 Swanson, *Sokeri Saari*, 4.
- 27 *Upper Peninsula Today*, Summer 1983, 15.
- 28 "Frank Aaltonen Memoir," 24.
- 29 *Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan*, 108.
- 30 *Annual Report of the Michigan Railroad Commission*, 11.
- 31 *Evening News* (Sault Sainte Marie, MI), July 15, 1916.
- 32 Chippewa County Warranty Deed 00082-00541, October 11, 1915.
- 33 Kyllikki Aaltonen Mullarkey Questionnaire, May 19, 1997, Swanson Files.
- 34 Swanson, *Sokeri Saari*, 3.
- 35 Frank Aaltonen Memoir, 28.
- 36 Chippewa County Warranty Deed 00086-00514, November 7, 1918.
- 37 Chippewa County Warranty Deed 00094-00068, October 1, 1919.
- 38 Hormavirtas's name does not appear on the 1919 sale deed to John Aro.
- 39 Koivisto, "Sokerisaaren suomalaisten historiaa."
- 40 Arbic, *Sugar Island Sampler*, 89; *Työmies* (Hancock, Michigan).
- 41 Swanson, *Sokeri Saari*, 3.

- 42 "Sylvia Maki Hovey and Impi Maki Curlis Questionnaire."
- 43 US Census, 1920.
- 44 US Census, 1930.
- 45 Holmio, *History of the Finns*, 157.
- 46 "Chippewa County Warranty Deed 00085-00035." Charlotte's son Frank still owned five acres on the island by 1938.
- 47 *Evening News* (Sault Sainte Marie, MI), November 11, 1981.
- 48 "Frank Aaltonen Memoir," 28.
- 49 "Aaltonen Speech."
- 50 "Aaltonen Speech."
- 51 US Census, 1920.
- 52 "Siiri Lampi Kangas Questionnaire."
- 53 "Sylvia Maki Hovey and Impi Maki Curlis Questionnaire."
- 54 *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN), September 9, 1928.
- 55 US Census, 1930.
- 56 Arbic, *Sugar Island Sampler*, 48.
- 57 The 1938 WPA inventory also noted the properties that were fenced, or had fencing somewhere, and the type of fencing that was used.
- 58 Swanson, *Sokeri Saari*, 10.
- 59 A survey in 1949–1950 found that wolves were rarely seen on Sugar Island, although coyotes were still common. Pruitt, Jr., "Mammals of the Chase S. Obsorn Preserve." Michigan state hunting regulations also expanded in the 1920s and many Anishinaabeg argued that they violated their treaty rights.
- 60 Nadelhoffer, Hogg and Hazlett, *Changing Environment*, 23–24.
- 61 "Frank Aaltonen Memoir," 26.
- 62 For a discussion on Ojibwe livelihood, labor, work, and economies, see Norrgard, *Seasons of Change*, 9.
- 63 Norrgard, *Seasons of Change*.
- 64 US Census, 1920, 1930, 1940.
- 65 US Census, 1920, 1930, 1940.
- 66 "Treasurer Records."
- 67 *Escanaba Daily Press* (Escanaba, MI), May 19, 1939, and May 28, 1939. This effort had been ongoing since at least 1916; see *The L'Anse Sentinel* (L'Anse, MI), January 8, 1916.
- 68 *The Evening News* (Sault Ste. Marie, MI), November 11, 1936.
- 69 "Indian-Handicraft Flyer."
- 70 *The Evening News* (Sault Ste. Marie, MI), December 5, 1938, and December 1, 1939; *Ironwood Daily Globe* (Ironwood, MI), December 7, 1938.
- 71 US Census, 1940. Two others seemed to have been paid something by the WPA to do their basket weaving.
- 72 *Ironwood Times* (Ironwood, MI), November 30, 1934.
- 73 For some of those older homes, it seems that their construction dates are estimates (which is why many of the homes are listed as being built in 1900 or 1910); see "Works Progress Administration Property Survey."
- 74 US Census, 1920, 1930, 1940. Of the 13 adults boarding in 1920, three were Finnish, but none were Ojibwe. Of the 16 adults boarding in 1930, two were Finnish and zero were Ojibwe. In 1940, six of the 12 boarders were Finnish and just one was Ojibwe.

- 75 *Evening News* (Sault Sainte Marie, MI), November 11, 1981.
- 76 “Aili Huhtala Allen Questionnaire.”
- 77 Swanson, *Sokeri Saari*, 5.
- 78 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 29.
- 79 US Census 1920, 1930, 1940; Arbic, *Sugar Island Sampler*, 85–89.
- 80 Swanson, *Sokeri Saari*, 8–9; General Records, 1918–1929.
- 81 Clerk Account Books, 1917–1922, 1923–1933; Andersson, Flavin, and Kekki, “Sugar Island Finns.”
- 82 Arbic, *Sugar Island Sampler*, 53–54.
- 83 General Records, 1918–1929.
- 84 Clerk Account Books, 1917–1922, 1923–1933.
- 85 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 29.
- 86 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 11.
- 87 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 27.
- 88 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 27. Aaltonen may have been placing the Cadreau, Gurnoe, Corbins, and Frechette families on Sugar Island in this group.
- 89 US census records in 1910, 1920, and 1930 identify most of the large McCoy family as “white,” but census takers (enumerators) often determined the “race” of individuals themselves (until 1960). In 1940, however, most of the McCoy’s are listed as “Indian.”
- 90 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 27. Aaltonen thought a McCoy married a Cree woman in the early 19th century and had several sons, but it also seems that there was intermarriage with local Anishinaabeg as well.
- 91 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 27.
- 92 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 29.
- 93 *Lansing State Journal* (Lansing, MI), April 17, 1925.
- 94 “Works Progress Administration Property Survey.”
- 95 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 30.
- 96 Chippewa County, Michigan, Deed Database.
- 97 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 31.
- 98 Koivisto, “Sokerisaaren suomalaisten historiaa.”
- 99 *Ironwood Daily Globe* (Ironwood, MI), March 30, 1928.
- 100 *Evening News* (Sault Sainte Marie, MI), July 31, 1929.
- 101 Swanson, *Sokeri Saari*, 26.
- 102 General Records, 1918–1929, 401. In 1929, Hytinen nearly came to blows with members of the township election board, which included Aaltonen, after Hytinen was accused of not being a naturalized citizen, thus not eligible to vote. Hytinen had voted in prior elections and was elected highway commissioner in 1922 and justice of the peace in 1926, so it is not clear why the issue came up in 1929.
- 103 For a succinct overview of Michigan Finnish labor and political groups and their ideologies, see Kaunonen, *Finns in Michigan*, 75–86.
- 104 Kivisto, “Decline of the Finnish-American Left,” 67.
- 105 *Ironwood Daily Globe* (Ironwood, MI), September 14, 1929.
- 106 *Upper Peninsula Today*. Summer 1983, 16.
- 107 *Evening News* (Sault Sainte Marie, MI), November 3, 1938.
- 108 *Evening News* (Sault Sainte Marie, MI), May 20, 1939.
- 109 McClinchey, *Joe Pete*.

- 110 *The Michigan Daily* (Ann Arbor, MI), November 24, 1929.
- 111 Arbic, *Sugar Island Sampler*, 93–94; Andersson, Flavin and Kekki, “Sugar Island Finns.”
- 112 Arbic, *Sugar Island Sampler*, 91; Kaunonen, *Finns in Michigan*, 67–69; Koivisto, “Sokerisaaren suomalaisten historiaa.”
- 113 The Sugar Island township records contain Prohibition-era applications for private businesses like pool halls, dance halls, and a “soft drink emporium” that required government permission (liquor could not be served by the glass on Sugar Island until 1941). Applicants had to provide five personal references. In the two applications submitted by Finns (Frank Kuusisto and Jack Koivisto), both for a dance hall (Finn Hall), every reference was a Finnish man. In the three applications made by non-Finns, two by a prominent French-Canadian named Ambrose Thibert and one by the prominent Angus McCoy of Indigenous and Scottish descent, only one Finnish reference was listed, Emil Hytinen; see Township Correspondence, Sugar Island Township Records, stored by the Chippewa County Historical Society; Swanson, *Sokeri Saari*, 36. In the late 1930s, a meeting of the “Galloping Gals” club at the home of Angus and Mary McCoy saw the attendance of 18 white and Indigenous women, but not a single Finn was there; see *The Evening News* (Sault Ste. Marie, MI), October 5, 1939. There was not a single Finn elected among the all-white Sugar Island Homemakers Club officers in 1940 either; see *The Evening News* (Sault Ste. Marie, MI), April 19, 1940. Similarly, the only Finnish member of the all-white Sugar Island Homemakers’ Club in 1939 was Emma Hytinen, the wife of Emil; see *The Evening News* (Sault Ste. Marie, MI), October 18, 1939, December 9, 1939, April 19, 1940.
- 114 The Ku Klux Klan terrorized Finns accused of being leftists in small communities in the eastern Upper Peninsula in the mid-1920s; see Kaunonen, *Finns in Michigan*, 79.
- 115 “Frank Aaltonen, FBI Investigative Case Files.”
- 116 *The Evening News* (Sault Ste. Marie, MI), December 15, 1938.
- 117 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 30.
- 118 *The Evening News* (Sault Ste. Marie, MI), August 19, 1937.
- 119 *Lure Book of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula*. Sugar Island also put out a tourism “folder” in 1941 according to the *Detroit Free Press*, which also called the island “an outstanding attraction,” with “pure Ojibway” residents; see *Detroit Free Press*, July 13, 1941.
- 120 “Aaltonen Speech.” Aaltonen believed that the Finns at the New Sweden Colony were the “truest pioneers ever to land on the shores of these United States.”
- 121 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 26.
- 122 “Frank Aaltonen Memoir,” 26.
- 123 *The Evening News* (Sault Ste. Marie, MI), September 23, 1953; *Petoskey News-Review* (Petoskey, MI), February 14, 1959.
- 124 “Story of Our People: The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians,” Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, <https://www.saulttribe.com/history-a-culture/story-of-our-people>.

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- “Aaltonen Speech.” 1938, Louis Adamic Papers, Princeton University Library, Special Collections, Box 55, Folder 2.
- “Aili Huhtala Allen Questionnaire.” 1998, Swanson Files.
- Chippewa County, Michigan, Deed Database, <https://rod.chippewacountymi.gov/landweb.dll>.
- Chippewa County Warranty Deed 00082-00541. October 11, 1915.
- Chippewa County Warranty Deed 00085-00035. January 17, 1919.
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- Clerk Account Books. 1917–1922, 1923–1933. Sugar Island Township Records, stored by the Chippewa County Historical Society.
- “Frank Aaltonen, FBI Investigative Case Files.” 1908–1922, National Archives and Records Administration, M1085.
- “Frank Aaltonen Memoir.” Louis Adamic Papers, Princeton University Library, Special Collections, Box 55, Folder 2.
- “Frank Aaltonen Personal Experience Record.” Louis Adamic Papers, Princeton University Library, Special Collections, Box 55, Folder 2.
- “Frank Adolph Aaltonen Draft Registration Card, 2559, Sept. 12, 1917, Chippewa County, Michigan.” National Archives, RG 163.
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