Gooseberry River found on French maps since 1670.

Gooseberry Falls State Park
Its History and Natural History
Grace Lee Nute

There are very few descriptions or historical sketches of state parks in print. Itasca State Park, because of its peculiar interest as containing the source of the Mississippi River, has been the subject of more writing than any of the others. Yet some of the other parks have a longer recorded history and are probably equally interesting from the point of view of geology, flora, and fauna.

One of the first Minnesota rivers to appear on a map was Gooseberry River on the north shore of Lake Superior, about forty miles northeast of Duluth. Revière des Groseilliers, which has been loosely translated as Gooseberry River, is found on French maps since 1670. Probably it was named for the great French explorer, Sieur des Groseilliers, who was on the North Shore in 1660.

By 1823 Major Stephen H. Long knew the present stream as Gooseberry River, for he so marks it on the map of his expedition of that year in two years a famous marine surveyor, the Minnesota country. In the next Lieutenant Henry W. Bayfield of the British Royal Navy, mapped all of Lake Superior. At 47° 28', or therabouts, he notes that the shore rock was “amygdaloid,” and that a “Rivulet falls over precipice 60 feet Perpendicular.” Probably he was describing Gooseberry River and falls, though not mentioning them by name.

A little more than a decade later the great French surveyor-explorer, Joseph N. Nicollet, marked several of the North Shore streams on his fine map, the first scientifically accurate map of the Minnesota country. He included Gooseberry River. In the late 1840’s another famous surveyor-explorer, David Dale Owen, and a party of government geologists were on the North Shore and recorded the stream as Gooseberry River. So far as is known, Owen was the first to really describe the area now included
in the park: “Immediately after turning into the bay into which Gooseberry River empties, a dike . . . showing beautiful clusters of columns, and traversing what appears to be a north-30° east dike. Just below Gooseberry River, large fragments of rounded rocks were seen embedded in the metamorphosed shaly rock, which is overlaid by the bed of compact columnar rock, noticed at other places, and the whole capped by a basaltic bed.”

In 1854 Thomas Clark passed by, keeping a diary en route, which is still owned by descendants in Superior, Wisconsin. He does not give the river a name, but he mentions it casually. In 1864 the state geologist sent Clark once again along the North Shore. This time in his diary and report he mentions the stream by name, noting it is “the next one below Encampment Island . . . It enters the lake . . . thirty-seven miles from Duluth.”

It is mentioned again in Charles Whittlesey’s report of 1806 on the mineral prospects of northeastern Minnesota. There were great hopes at that time that copper, and perhaps iron and the precious metals, might be found on the North Shore. Whittlesey, however, reported that there were few prospects for these in the Gooseberry River area, though excellent ones were noted at French River and some other places.

In 1870 an Ishpeming photographer took an interesting summer trip in his little sailboat, Wanderer, along the North Shore, photographing as he went. Among his wet plates, fortunately preserved at the Minnesota Historical Society, are many of the North Shore and, apparently, several of the Gooseberry Falls region. As yet the North Shore had not been desecrated by lumberjack’s saw or by fire to any great extent, and the wilderness streams and waterfalls were things of rare appeal.

Fishermen were the next to get acquainted with the area. Late in the century trout fishing in North Shore streams became a sport of men with rather deep and well lined pocket-books. After logging began in earnest on this shore—about 1890, though early cuttings are recorded in the preceding decade,—railroads accommodated these Nimrods. In my possession are copies of numerous photographs of fishermen and the river valleys they explored and the streams they fished about 1900. Even maps for their special use were printed. One of 1923 reads as follows: “Sportsman’s Map . . . March 1923. Compiled & Drawn by B. E. LaLonde.” Trunk Highway no. 1 is shown where Highway no. 61 now is, with a stretch marked “abandoned” running just north of it from Marata to a spot just beyond Gooseberry River and paralleling the highway’s course up to and beyond the Duluth and Northern Minnesota Railway,
which is shown running back on the heights from Knife River up to Popular River near Lutsen and a little beyond. This was the Alger Smith Company’s logging railroad, which began to ship from the Gooseberry River cuttings in 1903.

The Estate of Thomas Nestor owned the logging railroads whose landing was on the Gooseberry River at its mouth, and whose local offices and camp were nearby, on or close to the present picnic area and ledge. A manuscript history of logging and milling activities on the North Shore, written by Mr. John Fritzen of Duluth, area supervisor for the state Division of Forestry, mentions the Nestor enterprise: “In 1900 the Estate of Thomas Nestor, a large Michigan and Wisconsin firm, began extensive operations along the Gooseberry River watershed. Headquarters were at the mouth of the river where Gooseberry Falls State Park is now. One railroad went northwestward to the upper Gooseberry River watershed in Section 31-55-10 while a branch line went north to connect with the Alger Smith Railway at Split Rock River in Section 8-55-9. Large scale logging took place along the Nestor railroads, the logs being hauled to the lakeshore, dumped into a pond at the mouth of Gooseberry River, and rafted to the company’s mills at Ashland, Wisconsin and Baraga, Michigan.” The Nestor operations on the North Shore lasted until 1909.

Meantime the manufacture of square timbers began. “One of the largest operators,” writes Mr. Fritzen, “was Joe Pernoval, whose landings were along the North Shore between Gooseberry and Split Rock rivers. He operated between 1900 and 1906, both winter and summer, and produced many million feet of pine square timbers and logs. Logging wheels were used in the summer and sleds during the winter to get his products to the landings. For square timbers the trees had to be large, sound, and straight. They were felled and hewed by hand, generally two feet square, and as long as it was possible to get them. From the landing they were rafted to Canada for reshipment to England or Scotland, or to the iron works of Eastern United States. At their destination they were resawned into pattern lumber.”

One of the last large-scale pine operations on Gooseberry River was that of Edward Hines Lumber Company. It began about 1910 and lasted for several years. In 1917 the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad Company started to construct a branch line from Wales northeastwardly. Its main line ran north of the North Shore watershed, but several of the spurs reached timber along the headwaters of the Gooseberry, Split Rock, Beaver, and Baptism rivers. This line is still in active use, one of the two last logging railroads in Minnesota. The other is the
Minnesota, Dakota and Western.

The loggers were nearly gone by the early 1920's in the Gooseberry River area, the timber having been cut or lost in the great forest fires of 1903, 1910, and other years. About 1925 the present state highway was completed close to the water's edge. Gooseberry Falls State Park was created by the legislature in 1933 and operated as such, but not until 1937 was it established officially on its present basis. In 1933 the land—637.83 acres—was acquired jointly by the State Conservation Commission and the State Highway Department. In 1934 a CCC camp began operations in the park and continued its work until 1942. Trails were made, mapping was done, a picnic and camping ground was laid out, refectories and other buildings were put up, and many other tasks were performed. A superintendent's house was erected near the falls, and a resident superintendent has been on the grounds since that time.

Some of the most colorful characters along the North Shore in the years after 1854 have been mail carriers. It has been my good fortune to know, at least superficially, some of these men. One of them, George Ward, died only two years ago at the age of 87 years. He began to carry mail on the North Shore in 1883, usually on the snowshoe trail to Beaver Bay, but sometimes as far as Fort William. As he had to make his own bridges across the forty or more streams of the North Shore, he always had axes secreted at strategic places. One of these was Gooseberry River, where the trail was closer to the lake than in most areas, and so the stretch of water to be crossed was correspondingly broader than usual. Here, he informed me, he always hid an ax on either side of the stream, handy for cutting the poles necessary for crossing.

Sometimes it repays one to study a small area intensively, even though at first the spot may seem to have little that is unique. One can usually detect something unusual and even remarkable in flora, fauna, or geology, if one pries insistently enough into the secrets of the little spot. I began to be acquainted with the Gooseberry Falls State Park region even before it was acquired by the state, but my intensive study began only a few years ago. Probably as time goes on I shall find more and more to interest me. The following remarks are based mainly on notes in my diaries for the summers of 1945 and 1946, when I spent weeks in the vicinity and had ample opportunity to watch the changing life and moods of the park area. I discovered a surprising number of flowers, some quite rare; saw many animals; found large numbers of resident and migratory birds; and noted some interesting geological facts.

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