

2013 Michigan Archaeology: Native Copper Teachers' Companion

Native Americans mined copper on Isle Royale and in the western Upper Peninsula thousands of years before the French and British arrived in Michigan. Archaeological information tells us that native people were making tools out of copper as early as 7,000 years ago.

How did Native Americans obtain the copper they used to fashion implements and ornaments? Copper deposits were formed over one billion years ago on Isle Royale in Lake Superior, and in Keweenaw, Baraga, Ontonagon, and Houghton Counties. Much later in time—between about 2 million years ago and 10,000 years ago—glaciers scoured the ground surface, exposing veins of copper and breaking off and transporting pieces of copper as the ice moved to the south. Native Americans found the exposed copper veins, and used heavy stone hammers to break up the surrounding rock and extract the copper. They built fires on the copper deposits and then threw water on the rock to fracture it allowing the copper to be removed. Pieces of copper dispersed by glaciers – called “float” copper – were also available to native people. These scattered chunks of copper could be picked up off the surface, which required much less physical labor, but we do not know if float copper was rare or plentiful.

Copper is a soft metal and it can be shaped by hammering it. Native Americans did not melt copper and pour it into molds; they hammered a piece of copper to achieve a desired thickness, and then worked the sheet of copper into the desired shape. In this way, native people made spear points like the one shown on the poster. Copper was a versatile material, and along with spear points, Native Americans used it to craft knives, axes, awls, drills, chisels, fishhooks, harpoons, bracelets, and beads.

Archaeological information also demonstrates that copper was traded across much of eastern North America. Most of this copper probably came from the copper country in the western Upper Peninsula. Widespread trade in copper suggests it was a valued commodity among native people over a wide area. Some researchers have suggested that copper was not only useful for making things, but that the material itself was important. Johann Kohl, traveling in the Lake Superior region during the 1850s observed that native people sometimes carried pieces of copper with them, carefully wrapped and placed in small bags. Kohl said that these pieces of copper were handed down from father to son, and that “wonderful power was ascribed to them.”

In 1841, State Geologist Douglass Houghton issued a report on the extraordinary copper deposits in the western Upper Peninsula. Two years later in 1843, the Treaty of La Pointe was ratified by Congress. Under the terms of the treaty, Native Americans ceded copper country land to the United States. This opened a mining rush into the region, and for the first time, miners other than Native Americans began seeking and extracting Michigan's vast copper resources.