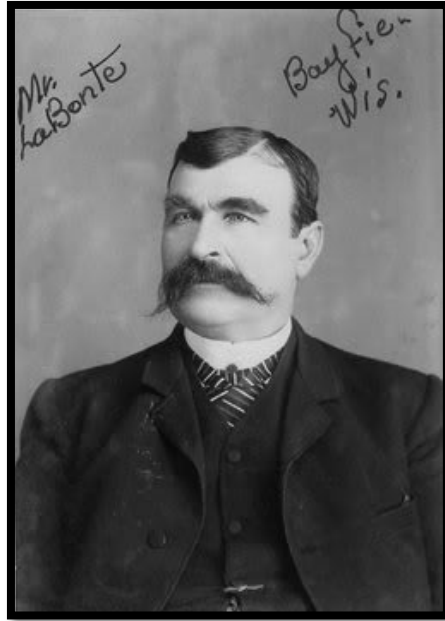


Title: Nazaire LaBonte's Early Bayfield

Summary: Thomas Bardon of Ashland was one of the oldest white settlers on Chequamegon Bay. In writing of the death of Nazaire LaBonte, Bardon says:

"The the tender thoughts of old pioneers are penned through tear dimmed eyes, as sad recollections come upon all who have gone ahead of us on the trail and are now in their eternal camp. The colony of dear old timers is now all together in the other world awaiting the final coming of old friends. We, too, who came half a century ago, in order of things, must soon join the departed associates of our boyhood. The land of snow and ice, and often of starvation, of desolation, of fish and fur, of privations and hardships, of frontier suffering and exile, of the few and scattered log hut settlements, is today changed. The smoke of the wigwam has died out. Snowshoes, steel traps, blankets and pack traps, dog trains, moccasins and leggins are no longer the style.

Today the sun shines on prosperous cities and happy people. Farms, factories, mines and railroads all are now where the muskrat and Indian held sway. But the fond recollections of old days and old friends will cling to us as long as life lasts. No new innovation can kill the law of old customs so deeply rooted in the hearts of the pioneers of early days on Lake Superior. We learn to love and respect the old pioneers. They stand as sentinels pointing back to the days of the early history of our state. We cherish the memory of the old pathfinders, first blazed the way in this then remote from civilization wilderness. Their lives and deeds are monuments. When they pass away, the good they did remains with us. The surviving pioneers will call the roll. How many will be recorded as absent? Their voices are forever hushed. Nazaire LaBonte was the last to ferry over the dark river and go from us forever. *Bayfield County Press*, October 20, 1906.



Bayfield Heritage Association Image

Nazaire LaBonte's Early Bayfield

Bayfield County Press

Friday April 6, 1906

Very fortunately, N. LaBonte, one of our pioneers, took time to write an interesting account of early Bayfield. H.C. Hale read it to 200 assembled guests at the Island View Hotel the night Bayfield's 50th birthday was celebrated. Now, with our town's hundredth birthday coming up, let's read it again. Eleanor Knight *Tales of Bayfield Pioneers; a History of Bayfield, 2008*

"Mr. Toast Master, the Bayfield Commercial Club and Ladies and Gentlemen: We are here this evening, as you all know, to commemorate Bayfield's fiftieth birthday, and I am duly grateful and exceedingly happy to be in your midst this evening, and at the request of the club, to make an accounting of the fifty years just past, which were spent here; and in order to prepare you for the ordeal, it might be well to remind you that I am not an orator of note, and if I should chance to hear someone say, "that man LaBonte is a cracker jack of a talker," don't you think for a moment I will believe it.

If you are prepared for the worst, I will proceed. I am one of a family of eleven: (five boys and six girls) and the son of Francis and Angeline LaBonte. I was born at Quebec, Canada, April 6, 1836, and lived on a farm adjoining the city from childhood, until I departed from Bayfield, which occurred when I was twenty years of age, taking passage at Detroit on the side wheel steamer Superior. Capt. Sweet commanded the boat.

I am not sure, but believe the folks around felt pretty bad when I left, and I have heard since, that lots of people in Canada cried when they learned I had quit the country; and it was said I was a brainy man and it was a shame to see me go and that it would be hard to replace me. I cannot say whether they ever replaced me or not.

Among those who were fellow passengers with me for Bayfield were Benjamin Bicksler, Frank Davidson, John T. Caho (who built the first steam mill here), and a Mr. Wyman and Steadman. Our boats cargo consisted of a little of everything, including a lot of cattle for Ontonagon, Michigan, but on account of a heavy sea that prevailed, we were unable to make that port and came on through to LaPointe, Wisconsin, then a stirring village and headquarters of the American Fur Company, where we arrived June 9, 1856, being enroute four days, as I remember it. The boat did not stop at Bayfield for the reason there was no dock here at that time.

I was anxious to continue on to Superior, but my cash was running low and when I struck the captain for a ride to that port on the strength of my good looks, or pay fare on the installment plan, and all I could scrape up was 17 cents, the captain in a gruff way said, "You walk, you pea soup." I never liked Captain Sweet since.

The following morning, in company with those mentioned, I came over from LaPointe to Bayfield in a row boat, which landed us at the present site of the Dormer Boutin Fish Company's plant, where there was a dock being built owned by a Mr. Charles Childs, of Sault St. Marie, who sometime afterward sold the same to H.M. Rice, C.P. Rudd and S.L. Vaughn, and was afterward known as the Vaughn docks, until sold to W.F. Dalrymple.

The only building here was a log house located where M. Ryder's store now stands, built and owned by the Bayfield Land Company for the accommodation of the men employed by this concern. The company consisted of H.M. Rice, President, John D. Livingston, Rittenhouse, Davidson and Payne. There was not a woman here, and it makes me lonesome to make this statement."

We continue N. LaBonte's own story of the early days in Bayfield.

"That part of the town lying on the flat was covered by a scattering growth of small Norway pine, with an occasional large white pine; and the only thoroughfare was a trail leading from the dock site (near the present Booth Fish Co.) to the log house mentioned. The hills, now dotted with buildings, were covered with mixed woods, mostly hard wood.

I found employment here with the Bayfield Land Company on a mill that was building on the site upon which now stands the R.D. Pike Lumber Company's mill. The mill was completed and operating in October of that year and about two months afterward burned down, after which I turned my attention to cutting cord wood which was sold to the steamers for fuel.

In the spring of fifty seven, I, with others, started to cut out the Bayfield and St. Paul stage road as far as Yellow Lake, a distance of about 140 miles. The balance of the route to St. Paul was by way of Wood River to Sunrise over logging roads. Sunrise, fifty miles from St. Paul, was a junction where the St. Paul stage met both the Bayfield and Superior stages and took their freight and passengers.

It required six days to make the trip from Bayfield to St. Paul and the fare was \$20, meals extra at 50 cents each and lodgings the same.

From this time, until about 1860, I cut cord wood, logs and made fish barrel staves of clear white pine that was so plentiful at that time.

On April 4, 1861, I was married here to Miss Matilda Davis, Father John Chebul officiating.

In the summer of '61, I went to work in the Red Cliff saw mill, the property of Uncle Sam, which had just been built under a contract with the government, by Colonel John Banfield. I worked there for twelve years in the capacity of sawyer, filer, and scaler on a salary of \$3 per day. My family and I resided there about half of this time and the balance of the time in Bayfield.

Six men, including myself, constituted the mill crew and the capacity of the mill was 6,000 feet per day, which was measured, marked and piled as fast as it left the saw. My neighbor, Commodore Bob Inglis, was engineer in this mill part of one season. Bob was a good mechanic, a trim, good looking fellow and, of course, was a favorite with the maids on the reservation and I never found out why he quit that good job and pleasant surroundings so soon. I am told Bob likes the girls yet, but of course one must not believe all he hears, and allowing that it is the truth I cannot blame him, for I like the girls myself.

The mill was sold to Duluth parties after operating twelve years, after which I built and kept a summer boarding place known as the LaBonte House at Bayfield, which house was open to the public for many years.

I raised a family of four children, two daughters Mrs. N. Bachand and Mrs. D.E. Church (later Mrs. Marietta DeMars), who are both here with their families at the present time, and lost a son at the age of six and one half years and also an infant daughter.

(Mrs. Marietta DeMars attended that 50th anniversary dinner and heard her father given the account of his pioneer life in Bayfield. When asked if she remembered any special details of the dinner she laughed, and recalled that the 200 dinner guests drank the first pots of coffee so quickly that more had to be made. In fact it was bad. Grounds flowed out of the pot and settled down in the cups like a quicksand bottom. Thanks, Mrs. DeMars for remembering something so typical of Bayfield. In this town, a bad cup of coffee deserves to be remembered for fifty years.)

My health has always been good and, as far as I know, I am a better man than my wife today. I am seventy years of age, have lived here fifty years and expect to live here fifty years longer, at the expiration of which time, if politics are too corrupt, or conditions just don't suite, I shall move West and grow up with the country.

Seven months after Bayfield's fiftieth anniversary, Nazaire LaBonte died. The date was October 20, 1906.