

# Part 2 of the story of Wabaningo

**By Bennett Hartz**

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In spring of 1837, the first after he returned from signing the treaty in Washington, D.C. that would create the State of Michigan, Wabiwindego paddled up Lake Michigan from the Grand River to plant on the flats on the west side of White Lake. It would be the last harvest of his life.

White Lake had been a farming village for centuries, benefiting from the White River, a nearby trading post, and from a "peculiar white clay for washing" on its banks that gave the lake its name. Nevertheless, it was a sleepy place to spend the summer, several days from the heart of Ottawa society on the Grand. Perhaps Wabiwindego had ventured there in search of richer humus, as bands did in years after poor harvests. Perhaps he had been outcast after the treaty deal went south. It is also possible, however, that he planted between the lakes every summer, preferring its longer growing season, lack of mosquitoes and radiant sunsets.

One May evening, Wabiwindego spotted a canoe plodding north along the Lake Michigan shore. In its berth hunched a young, sour-faced lumberman named Charles Mears, who had set out from Paw Paw in the south, searching for forests in which to stake a lumber claim. With him rode his 15-year-old brother, Albert, and two hired hands, Charles Herrick and Benjamin True. Their voyage up the coast had been fraught with danger, and they had capsized in the white caps several times in the preceding weeks, ruining much of their supplies.

The craft slid ashore "near where the Lighthouse now stands," and Wabiwindego met its haggard crew and offered them a spot to pitch tents beside his band's wigwams. The men spent the night, and then canoed across White Lake in the morn-

ing. Unknown to them, their host had recently shaken hands with President Jackson and sold all of West Michigan to the federal government, making possible both the lumber mill Mears would eventually build on White Lake and the twin towns it would birth, Whitehall and Montague.

Later in life, decades after Wabaningo had died and loggers and settlers had driven the Ottawa from White Lake, Albert Mears returned to the lake he had first seen as a teenager, now to work at a local bank. Nearing his 50s, and in a day when advanced age meant having witnessed a lost time of exploration and adventure, Albert regaled the town with tales of his trip to the lake before the Ottawa's displacement, including his overnight stay with—as best as he could remember—"Wabaningo." (Wabiwindego's name had been foreign to Albert Mears' ear, and he had heard it on only one occasion more than 30 years earlier.) Isaac Weston, the son of Albert's boss at the bank, published Albert's story in the local newspaper, the Montague Lumberman, coining "Wabaningo" for the first time in writing. Being a mishearing or misremembrance, it means nothing in Ottawa.

By chance, Weston also owned the entire west shore of White Lake, where Albert and Wabiwindego had met. He began calling it the Wabaningo Flats, and soon sold it to locals who picnicked on its bluffs. They started a cottage resort there called Sylvan Beach, and in 1897 built a hotel. While the sign read Sylvan Beach Hotel, most called it "The Wabaningo."

The resort immediately began using generic Native imagery to enhance its brand. It billed itself, primarily to Chicagoans, as a place "where once the Indian dwelt, and where the aboriginal trails still present an interesting feature in their picturesqueness." The local women's club borrowed the name for its 1906 community center, the Wabaningo Club, and it passed to the Wabaningo Post Office a few years later. So began the legend of Wabaningo.

Save in name, the Wabaningo character created by the cottagers bore little resemblance to Wabiwindego. Light in specifics—he was a Native who was once present but by then was gone—Wabaningo hewed close to Americans' stock imagery of Native Americans: stoic, yielding, uncivilized but honorable, gracious, and replete with feathered headdress. The stereotype, lent a vagueness to the character that generated, as each generation became further removed from its creation, an air of mystery.

Like many founding myths, Wabaningo reflects less any concrete historical happening than how the creators of the myth saw themselves. Wabaningo's token imagery helped the original cottagers transform White Lake into an idyllic woods and beach stuck out of time, a paradise far from the perils of the city and the various concerns of modern industrialized life. Through the lens of the Wabaningo story, the original cottagers recast themselves as his heirs and successors—naming buildings in his honor the way they might a grandfather or local hero—rather than confronting the uncomfortable fact that they were settlers riding a wave of easy land in the wake of the Grand River Ottawa's ruthless displacement by the federal government and lumber industry.

Thus did Wabiwindego, an Ottawa leader, a steward of the forests and waters of Western Michigan, become Wabaningo, a mysterious Native on the shore. The rest of his life was disconnected; the history unable to penetrate the familiar barriers of language, culture, race, the willful amnesia of Native removal. He and his children's heroic efforts to keep the Ottawa in Michigan—and his role in the creation of the State of Michigan—were all but forgotten.

Wabiwindego could have been far better honored, had the cottagers been at all inclined to try. But it is not without some irony that, without their knack for fantasy and commemoration, he might have been lost forever.