



MICHIGAN COPPER

In 1841, state geologist Douglass Houghton visited the Upper Peninsula. He reported that copper existed on the Keweenaw Peninsula. However, he warned that the red metal would be hard to mine.

Native Americans have used copper from the Upper Peninsula for thousands of years, but no one had tried to mine copper on a large scale. That soon changed. A few years after Houghton's report was published, hundreds of people journeyed to the Keweenaw to "strike it rich."

Most people moving into Michigan didn't know anything about mining. They used hammers, chisels and gun powder to loosen the rock. Since most of the copper was underground, it had to be hauled to the surface in a bucket. Then the rock was crushed to separate the copper from the waste rock. Companies shipped the copper to Detroit and other factory towns.

People living in Keweenaw found it challenging. The isolation, black flies and long winters made living in this part of Michigan difficult, and early mines struggled to make money. One exception was the Cliff mine. Founded by investors from Boston and Pittsburg, the Cliff Mine became the first successful copper mine in the Western Hemisphere.

After the Civil War, copper mining in the Keweenaw expanded. For forty years (1847-1887), Michigan produced more copper than any state in the nation. One of the nation's biggest copper enterprises was the Calumet and Hecla (C&H) Mining Company. During the 1870s, C&H produced half of the nation's copper.

Many immigrants from Europe, especially Finland and England, came to work in the mines. By 1900, the Keweenaw was one of the most populated areas in the state. Houghton County, at the center of the Copper Country, had the fourth highest population in the state.

By 1900, miners were working more than one mile beneath the surface of the earth to find copper. The deeper you mine, the more expensive it becomes. C&H tried to cut costs, but this led to a strike by the miners. The 1913-14 copper strike lasted 10 months. Although the miners won some of their demands, they began leaving the Keweenaw. Many moved downstate to Detroit to work in automobile factories where they paid more.

After the strike, copper production increased for a few years, but then began to slowly decline. In 1997, Michigan's last copper mine closed.