



Peter Nenno

Original Owner of South Manitou Island's "Sandy Point"

Peter Nenno has the distinction of being the original owner of the very smallest parcel of land on South Manitou Island. The very tip of South Manitou's southern point, called "Sandy Point," was originally the only part of the island that fell into Section 11 of T.30N; R15W – just 4.7-acres.

Peter Nenno purchased that parcel at the Land Office in Traverse City on May 15, 1863. The government's minimum price for cash entry sales was \$1.25 per acre^{1,2}, so Peter probably paid only \$5.88 for his parcel.

Thirty years earlier, Peter Nenno immigrated with his family to South Buffalo, New York in August of 1833. He was eight years old, and listed on the packet ship's passenger manifest as "Pierre Nenne." The family was originally from Berus, in the Sarr Valley region near Germany's border with France, and considered themselves Alsatians. The original version of their family name was "Nenaut" which, through the trail of records, can be found in various forms, such as Nenne, Nennes, Nans, and often Neno. The French pronunciation of the original name sounds most like "Nenno," so that is the version the family adopted in America.³

The Nennos were carpenters by trade, and no doubt found work quite easy to come by in the growing area around Buffalo. About four years after their arrival, in 1838, Johann, Peter's father, began to acquire land near Langford in North Collins Township, some thirty miles south of Buffalo. This became an area of farming communities, each of which had its own, unaffiliated Roman Catholic Church, and the Nennos were involved with the building of them all, as attested to by beautiful stained glass windows imported from Germany, many of which carry the Nenno name. In March of 1851, Johann, then known as "John" Nenno, bought a working farm between Langford and New Oregon, then, in December of the next year, sold it outright to his 28-year old son Peter for \$1,600 – about \$370 less than he had paid for it the year before. And thus, Peter Nenno is cited in the family records as being a farmer.⁴

But he is also cited as a "lumberman."

Peter married the French girl Mary Ann Heides in the summer of 1848. They were married at St. Louis' Catholic Church in Buffalo,⁵ which was the family's original church in America, and one they frequently returned to for worship, christenings and marriages.⁶ Two years later, the Federal Census for 1850 finds the couple in Mackinac County, Michigan, where Peter was working as a lumberman. At that time, Mackinac County comprised the northern two-thirds of the Lower Peninsula, and all of the Upper Peninsula, so at first it seems difficult to guess where the Nennos might have been living. However, with a few small exceptions, the mainland in the northern part of the state was still devoid of settlement.

Most of the activity was limited to a few east-side shoreline ports having natural harbors, and the islands in Northeastern Lake Michigan.⁷ From their position in the enumerations, it would appear that Peter and his wife were located on North Manitou Island.⁸ Much of the lumbering that was going on in this area at the time actually amounted to "wood chopping" – felling timber and cutting it into "four-foot wood" for use as steamboat fuel. It would probably be safe to presume that young Peter Nenno came to take advantage of wood chopping opportunities to raise the money needed to buy the farm in Collins Township from his father.

Ten years later, in 1860, the Nennos are listed as residing on North Manitou Island, with four children, aged infant to nine years old. Then, in the Spring of 1863, Peter purchased this small 4.7-acre parcel on South Manitou which was nothing but bare sand.^{9,10}

Now, 150-years later, one might wonder why anyone would have bought this apparently useless piece of land. It certainly wasn't for farming or logging; it probably wasn't for a residence since Peter had become the owner of a highly productive farm in New York State eleven years earlier, and had purchased seventy more acres in that area three years after that.^{11,12} There was a lighthouse nearby, but neither he nor his sons were light keepers. The U.S. Life-Saving Service eventually located a short distance up the beach to the west, but did not yet exist on the island in 1863.

The Nenno brothers were farmers and businessmen, with interests from Western New York State to Wisconsin and Minnesota, and from Buffalo southwest as far as Kentucky. Peter's son Nickolas, who was born in Michigan¹³, became the owner and operator of fish markets in Buffalo in later years. Could Peter have been involved in commercial fishing? Sure enough! The 1860 census for Manitou County, Michigan enumerates Peter Neno as a "fisherman"¹⁴ South Manitou's protected bay probably made a much better base of operations than the exposed shorelines on North Manitou, and shipping for the catch was no doubt also much more readily available at South Manitou, where Chicago-bound boats frequently stopped.

At the time Peter bought "Sandy Point," he and Mary Ann had six young children; Peter J., 12; John Baptist, 9; Mary Louise, 7; and Nicholas J., then just 2-years old. Peter, the oldest, was born near Buffalo; John and Mary came after the family moved down to Langford in Erie County. Mary's fourth child, Maria Magdalena, had died at birth on Christmas Eve day in 1857. Her fifth, Nicholas, was born on North Manitou Island three years later, in the Spring of 1861. Her next two children, Magdalena and Barbara, born in 1862 and 1863 respectively, both died before reaching the age of two of *Cholera Infantum*, then commonly known as the "summer complaint." Her eighth child, John Nicholas, was born in 1866, perhaps on South Manitou Island, but probably in Langford, and her last, Michael Benjamin, was born at Langford in the summer of 1868.¹⁵



Family records suggest that the Nennos never really abandoned New York's Erie County as their permanent home. Their extended families were large, and mostly settled in that area. Travel was also convenient, at least by contemporary standards. The Manitou Passage was heavily trafficked, making it easy to book passage on a vessel bound for Buffalo. From there, it was only about thirty miles to their "home place," Peter's farm. The uncertainty about "Nick's" birthplace suggests that it was probably the coming of Mary's eighth child that prompted the Nennos to leave the islands and return forever to New York State. Perhaps she had suffered enough heartbreak on the islands; she had lost three children there. Perhaps she convinced Peter that it was time to go home.

And so, just two years after buying their little piece of the island, the Nenno family said goodbye to their friends and neighbors – the Kitchens and Kirtlands, the Burdicks and Burtons, and the rest – and left the islands, never to return.

Tax records suggest that they probably left before the shipping season ended at the onset of winter in 1864. Federal assessments for the years 1865 and 1866 show that Peter Nenno was productively engaged in business in, and living at, Langford, probably beginning sometime in 1865.^{16, 17} The family was permanently established in Langford, New York in 1870, with Peter having returned primarily to farming.¹⁸ But over the years, the farm seems to have languished, being out of production, for all practical purposes, by 1880.^{19, 20}

The Nenno clan were no strangers to hotel ownership and management, such places actually being residential hotels, or "boarding houses" in those times. Others in the family were involved in that business in other towns, and in 1880 Peter bought the American Hotel in Springville. That was the beginning of his final career. The family then moved there,²¹ and soon thereafter Peter Jr. took over Springville's Farmers' Hotel.²²

Peter lived only nine more years, succumbing to "consumption" a few days before Christmas in 1889.²³ We now call it tuberculosis. Mary Ann lived only six more months, passing away that following summer. Both were laid to rest in the cemetery next to the St. Aloysius Catholic Church in Springville.²⁴

And thus ends the story of the man we might call "South Manitou Island's smallest land owner."

The Nennos, of course, were by no means "small" people, literally or figuratively. The Nenno men were big men. In a time when the average man's height was 5' 6½," the Nennos were typically from 6' 2" to 6' 8" tall, and 200-pounds, or more. The women in the family were also usually tall.

In another sense, this Alsatian immigrant family was also "large" in the annals of Buffalo and Erie County, and elsewhere. Peter's older brother Nicholas was the founder of Nenno, Wisconsin. Other Nenno men became brewers in Minnesota, and oil field pioneers in Ohio, West Virginia, and

Kentucky. Peter's son Nicholas became well known as the bigger-than-life "Nick" Nenno, owner and operator of several fish markets and butcher shops in the city of Buffalo. In various Catholic Churches south of Buffalo, from New Collins to Springville, the Nenno family name can still be found on stained glass windows, and the craftsmanship of Nenno carpentry abides in alters and sanctuary furniture.

As the passenger ferry approaches the National Park Service dock at South Manitou Island, it passes close by a promontory at the Southeast end of the bay, marked now by an odd little house with a distinctive pyramid-shaped roof. A hundred and fifty years ago, the passerby might have noticed a big man with his two young sons, fishermen all, hauling their boat ashore, bringing in the day's catch.

The man was Peter Nenno, first owner of this little piece of land called "Sandy Point," who takes his place in island history as the holder of the original land patent for the island's smallest parcel.



Editors Note: This essay is a compilation of information from a variety of historic texts and Internet resources. While information from these sources is not always in agreement, the information contained in this work represents an earnest attempt to remain faithful to the facts, or what was probable given the times and the circumstances of the events.



References

- ¹ U.S. Government Land Laws, 1854-1909, Nebraska State Historical Society
- ² Homestead Act and Land – Lincoln’s Legacy, State Historical Society of North Dakota
- ³ The Nenno History – How They Lived, Elizabeth Nenno Wilson, 1981, Rev 2003
- ⁴ The Nenno History – How They Lived, Elizabeth Nenno Wilson, 1981
- ⁵ Pierre Nenno record at Ancestry.Com, posted in “The Windsor Family Tree”
- ⁶ Ibid Note 3, pg 5c
- ⁷ Before the 1836 Treaty of Washington extinguished Native American claim to most of the land in the northwest part of Northern Michigan, the islands were nominally a part of Michilimackinac County (later renamed Mackinac County). In 1840, that portion of Mackinac County lying in the Lower Peninsula was divided into counties that remained attached for administrative purposes to Mackinac. The Manitou Islands were a part of Leelanau County until the establishment of Manitou County in 1855.
- ⁸ 1850 U.S. Census – Mackinac County, Michigan
- ⁹ Detail of “Sandy Point” from Original Orange Risdon survey map from 1847.
- ¹⁰ Over the years, this land has shifted with the waves and the wind, so that it now lies partially in Section 2. The west side of the property is approximately bounded by a line going due north on the boardwalk near the lighthouse, across the Kramer house and work shed behind the Lawrence Haas (or “Johnson”) house, to the bay several yards east of the present-day NPS dock. The parcel appears to also have gained about 9/10^{ths} of an acre.
- ¹¹ Pierre Nenno record at RootsWeb.Com, posted in “The Gentner Family Tree”
- ¹² 1855 Holland Land Co deed to Peter Nenno, History of the Original Town of Concord NY, pg 721
- ¹³ A story in the Nenno family about Nickolas’ name tells that Peter and his wife Mary Ann were out in a boat on the lake in Michigan, when Mary Ann went into labor for her fifth child. Having lost her previous baby at birth, she promised St. Nickolas, the Patron Saint of the Alsatian French, that if she could just get back to shore before her baby was born, she would name the child after him.
- ¹⁴ 1860 Census for North Manitou Island, Manitou County, Michigan, pg 79
- ¹⁵ Ibid..Note 11
- ¹⁶ 1865 Federal Tax Assesment List for Marshfield, NY – Peter Neno, Retail Dealer
- ¹⁷ 1866 Federal Tax Assesment List for Langford, NY – Peter Neno, Income Tax Liability
- ¹⁸ 1870 Census, Peter Nenno (“Nano”) family at North Collins township, NY
- ¹⁹ 1870 Agricultural Census, Peter Nenno Farm, Erie County, NY
- ²⁰ 1880 Agricultural Census, Peter Nenno Farm, Erie County, NY
- ²¹ 1880 Census, Springville, NY
- ²² History of the Original Town of Concord New York, pg 179 and 180
- ²³ Burial record for Pierre Nenno at findagrave.com
- ²⁴ Burial record for Mary Ann Heides Nenno at findagrave.com