

# A Michigan ghost town for all seasons



PHOTO BY RANDY KARR

**Tranquil:** By foot, a visitor enjoys the solitude, and the view, from an old steel bridge in Port Crescent.

BY RANDY KARR  
SPECIAL WRITER

While not as instantly evocative as Saugatuck or Grand Haven State Parks on Lake Michigan, Lake Huron's Port Crescent State Park, near the tip of Michigan's Thumb, is worthy of being counted among the state's great travel destinations. During the summer, three miles of fine sandy beach and the largest sand dunes on Michigan's Lake Huron shoreline await the visitor.

The fall season brings a blaze of color across the maple and oak forested dunes and possible glimpses of migrating raptors overhead. Walking and cross-country skiing reward winter visitors with solitude and reflection time. Spring is celebrated when shades of green emerge while winter's white melts away.

Port Crescent State Park occupies the site of an old sawmill town. In the mid-1800s, Port

Crescent thrived as a lumber and salt town situated near the mouth of the Pinnebog River. Steam powered saw mills lined the riverbank, employing hundreds of residents. Others worked in salt blockhouses, evaporating water from brine and filling barrels with salt.

As the lumber and salt business grew, families moved in. A two-story wooden school, Lutheran church, company store, hotel and tavern lined the town's several streets.

The Pack Woods Saw Mill added a 120-foot brick chimney to the main mill, and increased production by salvaging thousands of trees burned by a fire that swept the Thumb in 1871. It was a boomtown period. People thought Port Crescent would continue to prosper and grow — until 1881, that is.

On Sept. 5 of that year, the townspeople witnessed a fireball lighting up the afternoon sky. A one-hundred-foot wall of flame

blazed across the peninsula destroying all the Thumb's timber resources. The lumber mill, forced to close, was dismantled, and along with the 800-foot dock, shipped to Oscoda. The salt factories closed because the process of evaporating water from salt brine required firewood — and there was none. People left, taking their houses with them to neighboring communities.

In 1894, the last building was moved to a nearby town. Only the old steel bridge, a brick chimney, and nearby cemetery remained. Port Crescent became a ghost town.

In the 1950's, the state of Michigan purchased the abandoned town-site and razed the crumbling chimney, leaving the lower section as an eight-foot high monument. This landmark is the beginning point of a walking tour through old Port Crescent.

To reach Chimney Monument, turn off M-25 five miles south of Port Austin, and enter Port Crescent State Park Campground. Ahead, you will see the red brick chimney, a sand mining cart, and the Old Pinnebog River Channel.

Abandoned homestead sites dot the forested dunes on the other side of the river channel. To get there, walk past three docks extending from the riverbank, and continue to the lakeshore where the meager flow of the Old Pinnebog River enters Lake Huron. To avoid confusion, the original town switched its name from Pinnebog to Port Crescent and the other town switched from Pinnebog to Pinnebog.

A crescent-shaped bay curves between Flat Rock Point to the east and Hat Point to the west. In 1844, Walter Hume built a trading post here and called his settlement Pinnebog.

**Exploration on foot**  
From the lakeshore, take the trail going up the side of the dune through the dune grass. After another dune climb, you will reach a bluff overlooking the Port Crescent town-site. During the town's heyday, children gathered here to watch workers on the river struggle to free up spring's enormous logjams or

guide floating logs into sawmills lining the riverbank.

In the mid-1930s, the flood-swollen Pinnebog River overflowed into a sand mining pit up stream from Port Crescent. A torrent of water cut through the mining pit, creating a new river channel to Lake Huron. It was from this sand pit that Henry

Ford shipped sand to Ford Motor Company to make glass for the Model T.

Port Crescent State Park is many things to its visitors — alluring beaches, lakefront camping, hiking trails, and the perfect setting for watching radiant sunsets over Lake Huron. It is a chance to walk through a

town-site with the ghosts of Port Crescent's past. Above all, it is a magical place where the Thumb's hinterland meets-up with the alluring vistas of Lake Huron.

Freelance writer Randy Karr of Saline, is a former Wayne-Westland teacher.

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