LIKE THE Dust Bowl area of the Great Plains states, the northwoods region below the Great Lakes, from Lake Huron to northwestern Minnesota, was the site of one of the great environmental miscalculations in U.S. history.1 Beginning in the eastern part of the region in the early nineteenth century and generally migrating westward until the early twentieth century, lumber companies cut vast tracts of timber, and when the most valuable trees had been removed from a given area, they moved on to untouched forests. Once the biggest logs had been removed, the lumber companies picked up and left the Great Lakes states to harvest other forests, such as those of the Pacific Northwest. For years thereafter, the cutover region was plagued by intense forest fires and often-disastrous attempts to farm the land.

Nowhere was there more official encouragement to settle the cutover lands than in Wisconsin: the state’s immigration office made a concerted attempt to lure settlers from as far away as Europe; the University of Wisconsin published booster materials and provided technical support to farmers (devising,
for example, elaborate schemes for stump removal); railroads published immi-
gellant guides and other booster literature; and local newspapers editorial-
ized on how the region would equal or even surpass the southern parts of
the state in agricultural productivity. This vision of the region and its future
was persuasively summed up by William Henry, dean of the University of
Wisconsin’s College of Agriculture, in the introduction to his *Northern Wis-
consin: A Handbook for the Homeseeker*, a publication that had been mandated
by the state legislature to promote agriculture in the area. In his introduction,
Henry confidently predicted: “With farms supplanting the forest, northern
Wisconsin will not revert to a wilderness with the passing of the lumber in-
dustry, but will be occupied by a thrifty class of farmers whose well directed,
intelligent efforts bring substantial, satisfactory returns from fields, flocks
and herds.” Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing well
into the twentieth, agricultural boosters stubbornly ignored the realities of
climate, soil, and topography, which doomed most attempts to create produc-
tive farms. The failures, compounded by low agricultural prices in the 1920s
and the Great Depression of the 1930s, finally led policymakers to reverse
course and to implement pioneering forestry legislation and rural zoning
policies that relocated many settlers and resulted in extensive reforestation.

The story of this process is well documented, and the literature on the
subject is extensive. The classic works are Vernon Carstensen’s *Farms or
Forests* (1958) and Arlan Helgeson’s *Farms in the Cutover* (1962). Recently,
historian Robert Gough challenged the accepted view and presented an
alternative interpretation of the history of the region. He asserted that
Carstensen, Helgeson, and others shared the perspective of state officials and
planners. Gough took a different approach. By looking at the same region
from the perspective of the farmers themselves, he argued that many farmers
actually did succeed, even as others were thwarted by a fickle government
that first supported them and then worked against them by zoning them off
the land and encouraging reforestation projects. Gough made an important
contribution to our understanding of the cutover region, yet the hard fact
remained that the environment—with average growing seasons in some coun-
ties of less than three months and with a danger of frost in every month—was
simply not suited to the type of agriculture that had proven so successful in
southern Wisconsin. Furthermore, with increasing numbers of tourists,
hunters, and other outdoor enthusiasts flocking to the region, restoring the “wilderness” offered alternative economic opportunities that were better adapted to the environmental conditions found there.5

Gough’s alternative history raises an important issue. As William Cronon demonstrated with his analysis of Donald Worster’s declensionist history of the Great Plains and Paul Bonnifield’s progressive history of the same region, different points of view can lead even rigorous historians to different conclusions.6 Even composing a simple chronology of events involves decisions about what to include and what to leave out. Choices made about the beginning and ending of the story and the geographical scale to be used also involve judgments that can affect outcomes. Cronon concluded that the way to escape the relativistic problem inherent in storytelling was for scholars to strive to tell the most plausible stories they could. Carstensen and Gough both told plausible stories. Though Gough seemed to contradict Carstensen, they both spoke about important parts of the large and complicated historical and geographical reality of the Wisconsin northwoods. The viewpoint of the farmers was as valid as the viewpoint of state officials and planners, but the latter was arguably more important to understanding the larger political and economic structure within which the farmers operated.

Like Carstensen’s and Gough’s studies, this book is about northern Wisconsin, but it focuses on the Chequamegon Bay region, located at the western end of the south shore of Lake Superior and roughly bounded by the Apostle Islands to the north, Bayfield Peninsula to the west, the Gogebic iron range to the south, and the Montreal River to the east. In the 1820s, the Chequamegon Bay area was perceived as one of many stopping points between Sault Ste. Marie and Fond du Lac, but by the 1840s and 1850s, geologists saw it as a region to explore, analyze, measure, and map out, and by the 1870s, boosters saw the place as a wilderness paradise on the verge of becoming a great metropolis with a productive agricultural hinterland. But after the iron boom of the 1880s, the communities around Chequamegon Bay began to slowly adjust to a more modest and more realistic regional identity.

Instead of taking the perspective of distant planners and politicians or of individual farmers, I will examine the region from the viewpoint of early travelers, geological surveyors, and boosters in an attempt to explain how the image of the region was formed during the nineteenth century. I employ
a narrative-descriptive approach, most eloquently advocated by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, to show how language played a crucial role in place creation in the vicinity of Chequamegon Bay. Tuan has argued that geographers have not focused enough on the role of words in the making of place: “A curious gap in the extensive and growing literature on place is the attempt to address directly the role of human speech in the creation of place: curious because, obviously, without speech—without the use and exchange of words and the ideas they convey—there cannot be, in the first instance, any human action or force directed toward preconceived goals.” Tuan urged geographers to fill this gap and to consider “speech and the written word . . . integral to the construction of place, and therefore integral to the geographer’s understanding of place.” Not long after Tuan’s essay appeared, geographer Michael Williams stated that “good environmental history and good historical geography could well be regarded as a series of place stories,” and he agreed with historian William Cronon that scholars should tell not only stories but also “stories about stories.” Analyzing the words and viewpoints of geologists who traveled through the bay region and of boosters who settled there reveals how larger cultural movements influenced environmental perception. The descriptions of the region by early geologists were steeped in romantic imagery, and even the later geological reports utilized romantic aesthetic conventions; boosters then drew on the aesthetics as well as the data in geological reports to bolster their arguments for development.

Although this book builds on the works of scholars in many fields, place, region, and environmental perception have long been core foci of geographical research. The leitmotif of this book is succinctly captured by the historical geographer Ralph Hall Brown in the first chapter of his 1948 classic, Historical Geography of the United States: “Men at all times have been influenced quite as much by beliefs as by facts.” And to paraphrase Brown, there is no better illustration of this truth than the initial settlement and boosterism of the Chequamegon Bay region. Geologists and boosters played key roles in shaping how people perceived this place. Environmental cognition—how people perceive a place, and what people believe about a place—influences their behavior within the physical and social environment, thereby affecting the development and even the creation of place.

*Place* is a complex word, applied to units of space of varying and sometimes overlapping dimensions that have meanings that shift over time and
may differ radically between individuals and groups at any given moment. Geographers naturally have a proprietary interest in place, just as psychologists do for the term cognition, and they have arguably produced the best work on the subject. Despite the fact that some excellent and often better-known work on the topic has been done outside the field of geography, the concept of place has always been central to the discipline. It is related to the concepts of region and area and can be used interchangeably, but the word place itself generally implies a more intimate unit of space and is tied to two other and equally complex terms: milieu and landscape.

By the end of the nineteenth century, German geographers had begun to define geography as landscape science, or Landschaftsgeographie. In his influential 1925 essay, “The Morphology of Landscape,” geographer Carl Sauer introduced the concept to American geographers as an alternative to environmental determinism in order to refocus attention on human impact on the environment rather than the reverse. With an increasing emphasis on cultural history, this line of thought became known as the Berkeley school. Like place and milieu, the word landscape implies an accessible and intimate portion of the earth. Thus, we have the definition derived from landscape painting, meaning “a portion of the earth’s surface that can be comprehended at a glance.” J. B. Jackson, who is credited with founding the field of landscape studies, usefully expanded the artist’s definition, noting that a landscape is “a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence.” Jackson dramatically entered the American landscape scene in 1951 with the influential journal Landscape. He encouraged a wide range of contributions to his journal but was especially successful in enticing an eclectic group of academic geographers not only to submit articles but also to let their hair down and write for a larger audience. Ever since, landscape has been an acceptable focal point for qualitative geographical research. More recently, scholars have applied techniques borrowed from literary criticism to read landscape like a text and discern power relations and ideology in the landscape.

Recent historiography identifies three broad themes in environmental history: ecology, cognition, and production. Worster has argued for focusing on modes of production—or agroecology—and especially on how the rise of a capitalist mode of production has massively reorganized and simplified natural systems. Craig Colten and Lary Dilsaver have identified three
organizing themes in the lineages of environmental inquiry in historical geography: cultural landscapes, environmental understanding and evaluation, and resource use and management. Colten and Dilsaver do not argue for one theme over another but rather plead for historical geographers to refocus their attention on environmental themes. William Cronon has argued that the main challenge for environmental historians is to integrate ecology, cognition, and production in their studies. He has cited Arthur McEvoy’s *The Fisherman’s Problem* as one of the few studies that have done so. McEvoy developed a cognitive theory of nature and culture that he used as his model to interpret changes in resource laws and the California fisheries. The laws resulted from a changing understanding of the environment—organized behavior that altered the environment, to which people adapted again. As Ralph Brown observed, people are influenced quite as much by what they believe to be true as by what is true. And decisions are often based as much on misunderstanding as on understanding; people misunderstand each other, and they also misunderstand the land. Their responses lead to unexpected changes in their social and physical environments.

Putting the dynamics of people-land and people-people interactions into spatial and temporal context can help explain why humans behaved as they did in a given environment in the past. During the nineteenth century, the Chequamegon Bay region on Wisconsin’s Lake Superior coast was the scene of dramatic cultural, economic, and environmental changes. The changes were complex and can be attributed to Euramerican immigration, industrialization, capitalism, globalism, and an emerging mass culture. But the best way to understand the changes that created the place known as Chequamegon Bay is by analyzing the written documents about and of the place, which not only reflected shifting visions of the region but also were intimately tied to the larger processes named earlier. These documents include maps, expedition narratives, geological surveys, railroad pamphlets, local and distant newspapers, periodicals, and advertisements.

There are two main parts to this book. The first part (chapters 1, 2, and 3) is about reconnaissance and geological surveys. Here, the scale is larger and encompasses the entire south shore of Lake Superior. These chapters are more about moving through space than about being in place. Chapters 1 and 2 analyze the texts written by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and Thomas L.
McKenney on the journey from Niagara Falls to the western end of Lake Superior in 1820 and 1826, respectively. Chapter 1 describes the logistics of the journey as well as the political economy of the Lake Superior country. Chapter 2 shows how both men, Schoolcraft the mineralogist and McKenney the Indian agent, were deeply influenced by romantic poets, painters, and novelists: romanticism shaped the way they saw the land and its inhabitants. Chapter 3 explores the social, economic, political, and environmental implications of the first rigorous geological and ordinance surveys of the south shore of Lake Superior, set in the context of mid-nineteenth-century science. David Dale Owen, son of the utopian industrialist Robert Owen, orchestrated a geological survey of most of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota and parts of Nebraska Territory during the late 1840s that was so impressive that it served as a model for future surveys. Charles Whittlesey, of Cleveland, Ohio, surveyed the northern Wisconsin sections of Owen’s survey. Whittlesey was probably the best field surveyor of his day, and history would prove him to be one of the most brilliant scientists as well. His surveys would shape the way settlers and speculators saw the land and would have a lasting impact on the economic development of the region.

The focus of the second part of this volume (chapters 4, 5, and 6) is on place. Chapter 4 shows that by the time the first towns were platted in the 1850s, two paradoxical images of the region had emerged. One envisioned a port city that would surpass Chicago in population and industry; the other promoted the region as an escape from places such as Chicago. Geological surveys had mapped out the resources to actualize the first vision, but conventions for depicting geological features used in the surveys (and arguably influenced by artists and poets such as Lord Byron) were copied in pamphlets designed to bring tourists to the area. Chapter 5 begins by showing the crucial role played by local newspapers in place making, and then, drawing on the work of William Cronon, Richard Slotkin, Richard White, and others, it identifies three popular narrative models that recurred in the local newspapers from the 1870s to the 1890s. The first was the booster’s “future city” model, the second was the (very Turnerian) “independence on the land” model, and the third was the “Wild West” or “cosmopolitan frontier” model. Having a grasp of these three models is crucial to understanding the self-image of the Wisconsin north coast towns during the period. Chapter 6 contrasts the bucolic
vision in artist Henry Wellge’s bird’s-eye views of the towns of Bayfield, Washburn, Ashland, and Hurley with widely published depictions of Ashland and Hurley as “hellholes” — centers of extreme violence and vice. Finally, the epilogue analyzes the First Annual Apostle Islands Indian Pageant, held in 1926, and explores what the event said about the revisioned landscapes of Lake Superior.

This book might be characterized as a regional geography, but it does not start with a region. Instead, it begins with something less defined: space or territory sought by explorers under government, commercial, or scientific sponsorship. It documents what might be called cognitive imperialism — how new visions of the place absorbed old visions and became hegemonic and how grandiose visions later crashed against environmental limitations. Interrogating the texts of Schoolcraft and McKenney in the 1820s, the geological surveys of Owen and Whittlesey in the 1840s and 1850s, and the articles and publications of newspaper editors and other boosters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this work shows how what was seen as mere space became filled first with romantic images, then with scientific images, and finally with images based on the desire to entice people to settle and begin economic development in the region. It was only in the later stages of the image-making process that all the images, past and present, began to cohere to produce what might be called, for the first time, a region. Throughout this volume, I have tried to meld the geographies of physical nature with the geographies of human ideals and thereby demonstrate how thoroughly and paradoxically those two realms are entangled with one another.