

The Chadakoin River

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UNTIL RECENT TIMES the outlet of famous Chautauqua Lake in Southwestern New York never had a name. The Indians named other waters in the vicinity but not the outlet, they apparently considered it a part of the lake or a branch of the stream into which it flowed. Likewise the first white men to explore this region, the French, did not give the outlet a name although it formed a part of their important waterway from Canada to the Mississippi. The Evans Map of 1755 shows only one name, Conewago, between the Lake and the Allegheny.

Even after the permanent American settlement in the early eighteen hundreds the outlet had no name aside from its functional designation, the Outlet. Ordinarily it would have been called Chautauqua Creek but that name was given instead to the small stream flowing into Lake Erie that formed the western end of the old Erie—Chautauqua portage. And so the outlet remained nameless for a hundred years.

Such anonymity is not surprising in so small a stream, which carries the waters of the Lake into Cassadaga Creek, a distance of only about ten miles. But the importance of the stream increased with the growth of the city of Jamestown, located on its banks, and when the city became large and old enough to develop a civic pride, a dignified name was sought. The opportunity for an official new name came in 1904 with the mapping of the Chautauqua and Jamestown Quadrangles of the Topographic Survey, and the Outlet became the Chadakoin River.

“Chadakoin” was one of a dozen spellings devised by the French for phonetic equivalence to the Indian name which, much later, the Americans spelled Chautauqua. As a new place name it was therefore just a French version of an Indian name whose English

version had been in use for a hundred years. Any evidence of duplication was, however, obscured by the little matter of pronunciation. The sponsors for the new name must have known how it was pronounced, but they did not care and they did not need to care, because as an American place name Chadakoin had to be pronounced American style, and thus it lost all resemblance to Chautauqua and became a *new* name on the land. (Chadakoin probably holds the record for distance between French and American pronunciation—a famous contestant in that field, Ypres, is a poor runner-up.)

In spite of its dubious antecedents Chadakoin has been a “good” name. The man-in-the-street can tell you that it is an old Indian name, it is widely and proudly used, and it lends distinction to a modest stream. But, best of all, it has provided something actually unique in the way of American place-naming.

On the other hand “River” has not been a good name. It was obviously grandiose for a stream whose waters had to flow through two creeks, the Cassadaga and the Conewango in order to reach a real river, the Allegheny, twenty miles away. The man-in-the-street sensing its pretentiousness is not likely to say “River,” and the serious writer studiously avoids the term. Of course “River” is used, mostly carelessly, sometimes deliberately but seldom proudly. Fifty years of official sanction and local promotion have not quite succeeded in making a river out of the outlet.

But here again we have an example of unique place-naming—let us call it a two-creek river.

And there are a few die-hard old-timers who still call it the Outlet.