

Early Maps Of Dakota: Their Use In Placename Research¹

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Abstract

We have examined a number of historical maps of Dakota Territory from 1703 to 1889 for the purpose of making an index to placenames in this early period. These maps and the written documentation that often accompanies them have helped us resolve several troublesome onomastic questions.

Placename research in South Dakota goes back to the 1930s, when Writers' Project workers under the leadership of Lisle Reese spread out over the state and collected names and the stories of their origins. Archer Gilfillan, a published novelist, wrote most of the entries, and Dr. Edward C. Ehrensperger, Professor of English at the University of South Dakota, edited the material and published it under the auspices of the Federal Writers' Project. A first edition, in six separate volumes, appeared in 1940; a second one-volume edition came out in 1941. In North Dakota, where placename research came along somewhat later, most of the credit goes to Mary Ann Barnes Williams, who spent many years collecting names and stories and published a one-volume dictionary in 1966.² While researchers in both states made extensive use of written sources, much of the information came from informants, many of whom were present at the time of name giving in these youthful states. Yet many names, especially of natural features and of settlements associated with natural features, predated these informants, who nevertheless were seldom at a loss for ingenious stories to account for these names' origins.

Dependence on oral information is risky, as stories about how places got their names often develop without regard to the actual origins, especially if the documentation is obscure or far removed from the actual places. This has often been the case in the Dakotas, where early maps

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and records of explorers were not available to those people who eventually settled the land and perhaps learned these names from land agents or land offices. One example is the name of one of South Dakota's largest natural lakes, *Lake Albert*. This feature was named in 1838 by explorers working for the U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers to honor the chief of that agency, John J. Abert. When settlers came into the area in the 1870s they assumed the unusual name – *Abert* – was a misspelling and consequently changed it to the more familiar *Albert* (Bray 90-94; Ehrensperger 290).

Reliance upon primary documentation is not as common in placename research in the United States as it should be. With notable exceptions, such as Frederic Cassidy's study of the placenames of Dane County, Wisconsin, researchers have depended too much on secondary sources, especially local newspaper features, county histories, and postmasters.

Placename study in this country, as is often noted, differs from that in Europe in that we seek the stories behind the name and have less need to examine the linguistic features of names than do scholars in those countries whose names go back many centuries. Yet, in seeking those stories and verifying them it is essential that we look for the earliest appearance of these names. The most obvious primary source for these names is early maps.

For several years we have been examining early maps of the area that is now North and South Dakota (and somewhat beyond that area for the earliest maps) for the purpose of identifying the geographic names that appear on them.³ This effort has two goals. First, we aim to produce a complete index of names that appear on these maps, with the locations as clearly identified as possible. At this point, we have examined over fifty maps and have identified over 4,000 different names from the earliest extant maps to the year 1889, the year that both Dakotas achieved statehood. These names have been placed in an alphabetical list keyed to the maps and the locations as close as possible. Secondly, we are trying, using all available resources, to determine the origin of these names and to account for the variant forms. The cartographic material available to us includes original maps in our university's collection and copies of other significant maps. In this paper we survey the history of mapping in this area, summarize our methods, offer comments on our

successes and failures, and give a few selected examples of how using these maps has helped resolve troublesome onomastic questions.

The area that is now North Dakota and South Dakota was inhabited in historical times by several groups of American Indians, including the Mandan and Aricara in the Northwest, the Chippewa in the Northeast, and the Dakota (or Sioux) in most of the rest. European exploration came first from Canada, but early explorers provided little specific information about the land or the people even as late as the middle of the eighteenth century. The area, long held by France, came under Spain's control in 1762, but the Spanish did little to make their presence known. In 1800 France again took possession but sold the land in 1803 to the United States as part of Louisiana. Dakota Territory was not organized and opened for settlement until 1861, and another twenty-eight years passed before the Territory entered the Union as two states in 1889. Before 1858, when the Yankton Sioux ceded a large tract in the southeastern portion of the Territory, the land remained in the hands of the Indian tribes and was not legally available for settlement. For most of the first half of the nineteenth century, however, there had been substantial commercial interest, with the fur-trading industry dominating the area.

Maps of the Missouri River existed as early as the 1670s as a result of the explorations of Marquette and Joliet, but none offered anything more than speculation for the Dakotas. The first map to show any known features of the area is the Claude Delisle map of 1703, based largely on the remembered experiences of Pierre Charles Le Seuer. This map, like its subsequent, more accurate editions drawn by Claude's son Guillaume Delisle, covers much of eastern North America. It contains only one named feature (other than the Missouri River) in the Dakotas, *Lac des Tintons*, apparently Big Stone Lake. In Guillaume Delisle's 1718 edition (Fig. 1),⁴ the lake name is dropped, but the identification of the tribe remains, along with other information about Indians. The "Tintons" referred to are the Teton (or Prairie) Sioux, generally known as Oglalla Lakota today. At a point somewhat to the south on this map, at what is likely the mouth of the Big Sioux River, Delisle added a note that the French go up the river only this far.

Delisle's maps look primitive to us, but they were much superior to most of those produced in America before this time. These maps were widely circulated in the eighteenth century,⁵ and Delisle's influence is

visible in the work of most American mapmakers for the rest of that century, including John Mitchell, whose 1755 *Map of the British and French Dominions in North America*, is one of America's most famous maps and, in the opinion of one writer, "without serious doubt . . . the most important map in American History" (Martin 50). Mitchell depended heavily on Delisle's work and added no new features or names for the upper Missouri. In 1763 Emanuel Bowen published a map of North America which looks suspiciously like Delisle's, although he added features to the north of Delisle's coverage, namely the Red River of the North. Most of these features and their locations are highly speculative.

The last few years of the eighteenth century saw considerable commercial exploration of the Missouri and its tributaries, and fur traders were active on the river up to a large loop known today as the Big Bend. This wide curve in the river shows up on most maps of the era as much larger than it is, an error started in a 1794 map drawn by Antoine Soulard (Fig. 2) and continued long after the true dimensions of this bend were known.

Soulard's map probably depended on the travels of James Mackay, a Canadian trapper who was also responsible for another important cartographic document. In 1796 Mackay teamed up with John Evans, an imaginative Welshman who was searching the river for evidence of the legendary Prince Madoc and his lost tribe of Welsh Indians. Evans did not find the Welshmen but he produced a series of sketch maps of unusual accuracy and on which were placed the names used by traders for most of the rivers and creeks. Most of these names are still in use, their permanence assured by the fact that Lewis and Clark used Evans' maps as they worked their way up the Missouri in the first autumn of their famous voyage. Clark had these sketches with him and frequently made annotations on them, so many that it was thought until a few decades ago that the maps were actually his. Despite the enormous cartographic contributions made by Lewis and Clark in the Upper Missouri and the Northwest, they actually added very little to what was already on the Evans map for the Dakota part of their voyage (Wood 35-37; Moulton 1:6).

In the same year that Lewis and Clark set out on their journey, Samuel Lewis (not related to Meriwether), a St. Louis engraver, published a map based on Soulard's. In 1814 Lewis engraved a map based on the sketches of the expedition; it was published as part of



Fig. 2. Detail from Soulard's 1794 manuscript map showing the Big Bend ("The Grand Detour") of the Missouri River.

Nicholas Biddle's *History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark*, and the cartouche credits these two men as the cartographers. Yet, even with this new information, errors from older maps were continued. For instance, despite their careful calculation of the distance both around (thirty miles) and across (one and a quarter miles) the Big Bend (Moulton 3:96), this map continued the tradition of showing that feature as excessively large.

In the next stage of mapping the Dakotas, cartographers turned away from the river to include much of the inland area. Joseph Nicollet (1786-1843) produced what many scholars consider one of the greatest maps of the nineteenth century, *A Map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi River* (Figs. 3 and 4). Often popularly confused with the much earlier explorer Jean Nicolet (1598?-1642),⁶ Joseph Nicollet was a French scientist who came to the U.S. at his own expense and began mapping the Mississippi Valley. His advanced methods came to the attention of the Bureau of Topographical Engineers, who began to support his work in 1837. In 1838 and 1839, Nicollet and his assistant John C. Frémont, then a young lieutenant, traveled throughout Eastern Dakota, widening the range of his already extensive cartographic coverage of Minnesota. Nicollet's skillful use of scientific instruments permitted much greater accuracy than had been achieved by earlier cartographers, who had been able, by solar and stellar observation, to determine latitude but had not been able to determine longitude with any reliability. Nicollet used astronomical data (such as eclipses and planetary transits) and accurate chronometers to fix longitudes to an accuracy within ten minutes of a degree. He also determined altitude by placing barometers at fur posts and missionary stations with the request that the data be kept on a regular basis and sent to him for inclusion on the final map (Bray 1-41). Nicollet died just before the final edition of his map appeared in 1843, but his influence continued even beyond this important map. John C. Frémont (1813-90), one of America's great explorers and cartographers, had learned his skills well from the master and used them as he mapped his way across the West all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

Nicollet also took the time to learn Indian languages, especially Chippewa and Dakota (or Sioux). He travelled with guides and translators and determined what names were used for minor streams, hills, and other features. Most of these names appear on his map, many of them in forms still easily recognizable to modern speakers of Chippewa

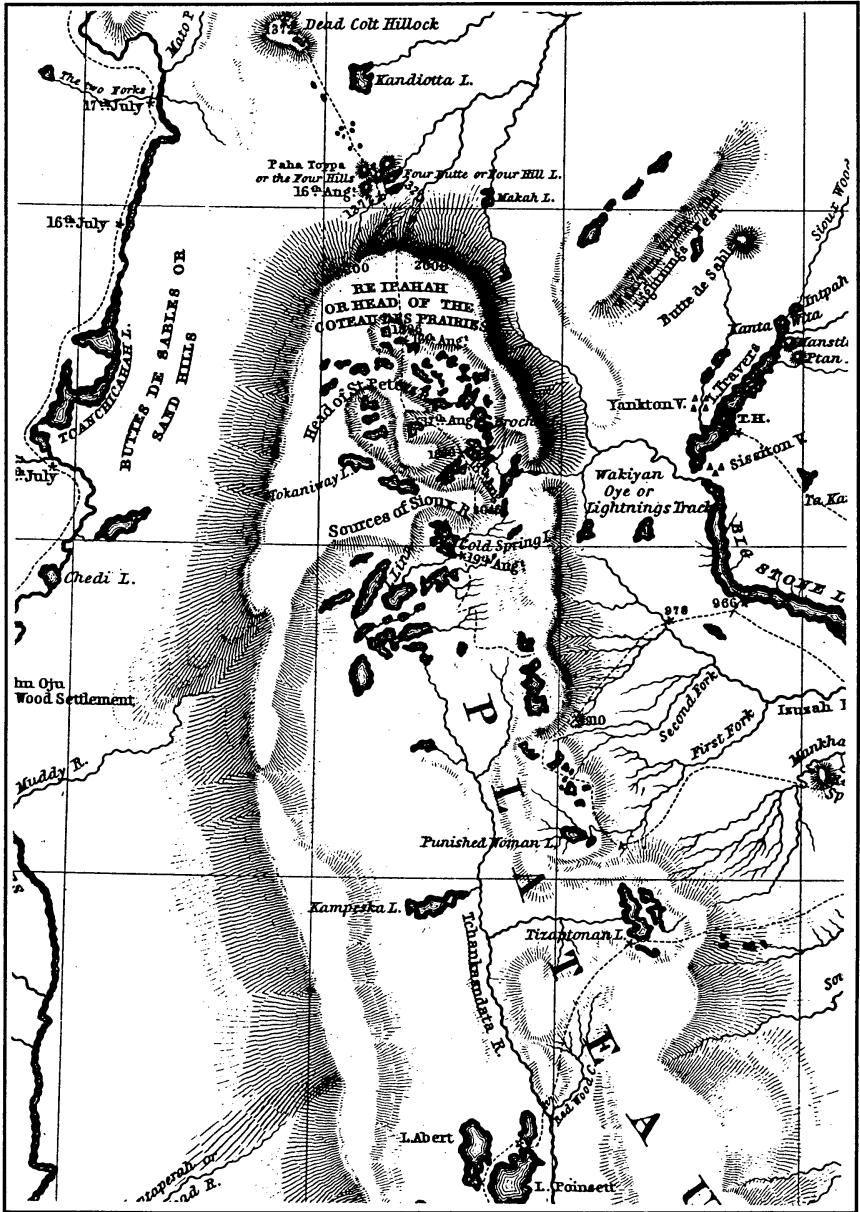


Fig.3. Detail from Nicollet's map showing the area that is now southeastern North Dakota and northeastern South Dakota.

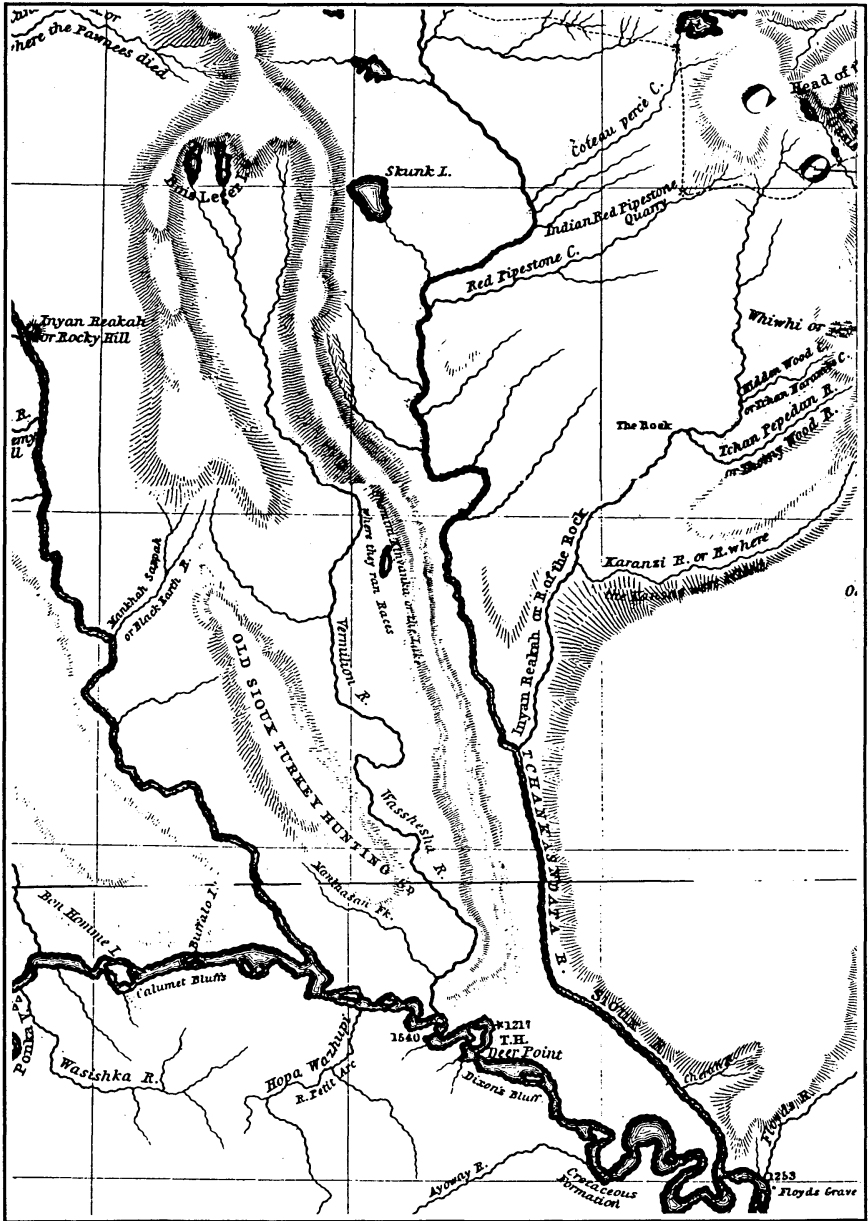


Fig. 4. Detail from Nicollet's map showing the area that is now southeastern South Dakota. (Permission requested.)

or Dakota even though these names may no longer appear on official maps made after settlement. (Howard 282-83). Nicollet and Frémont were also rather generous in bestowing names on certain features, especially small lakes. Their trail is strewn with names commemorating their benefactors and friends: Lakes Benton, Poinsett, Abert (now Albert), Linn, and Preston, honor politicians or bureaucrats no longer remembered in the region; and Lake Jessie, now dry, honors Sen. Thomas Hart Benton's young daughter Jessie, whom Frémont married on his return home.⁷

Nicollet's map is an extremely important document for this area, and its importance is enhanced greatly by the journal that Nicollet kept. The journal provides a wealth of scientific data, and it frequently explains the reasons for placing a name on the map.⁸

Nicollet's map, based as it is on limited exposure to inland features, contains some minor errors, but it remained the standard for mapmakers until after 1861, when land office surveyors began the slow process of dividing the land into townships and sections, a process not finally completed for the two states until after 1910. These maps and their commercial spinoffs by companies such as Asher and Adams in 1875 and Rand McNally in 1882 (Fig. 5) are accurate and complete, and they provide the greatest number of the 4,000 names in our index.

Meanwhile, explorations in the western part of Dakota continued, first by G.K. Warren under the War Department, who first placed the Black Hills in their proper location. This major feature had often been named on early maps, but it had been so rarely visited that confusion over its location persisted until mid-century, showing up as far east as the Missouri River, as depicted in an 1846 map by Rufus Sage (Fig. 6), and as far west as the Rocky Mountains. Warren's 1857 map has the Black Hills finally in place (Fig. 7). Extensive mapping of the interior of the Black Hills was done by cartographers accompanying George Armstrong Custer's Seventh Cavalry. This party's discovery of gold led in 1874 to the eventual opening of the western part of Dakota to white settlement.

This brief survey of some of the maps of Dakota Territory gives some idea of the kinds of material available to anyone studying names in a region that has been settled in relatively recent times. Indexing the names has been a major part of this project, but the index is seen as a means for further study. For the historian to be able to tell quickly when a name first appears is very helpful. For the onomastician, the resource

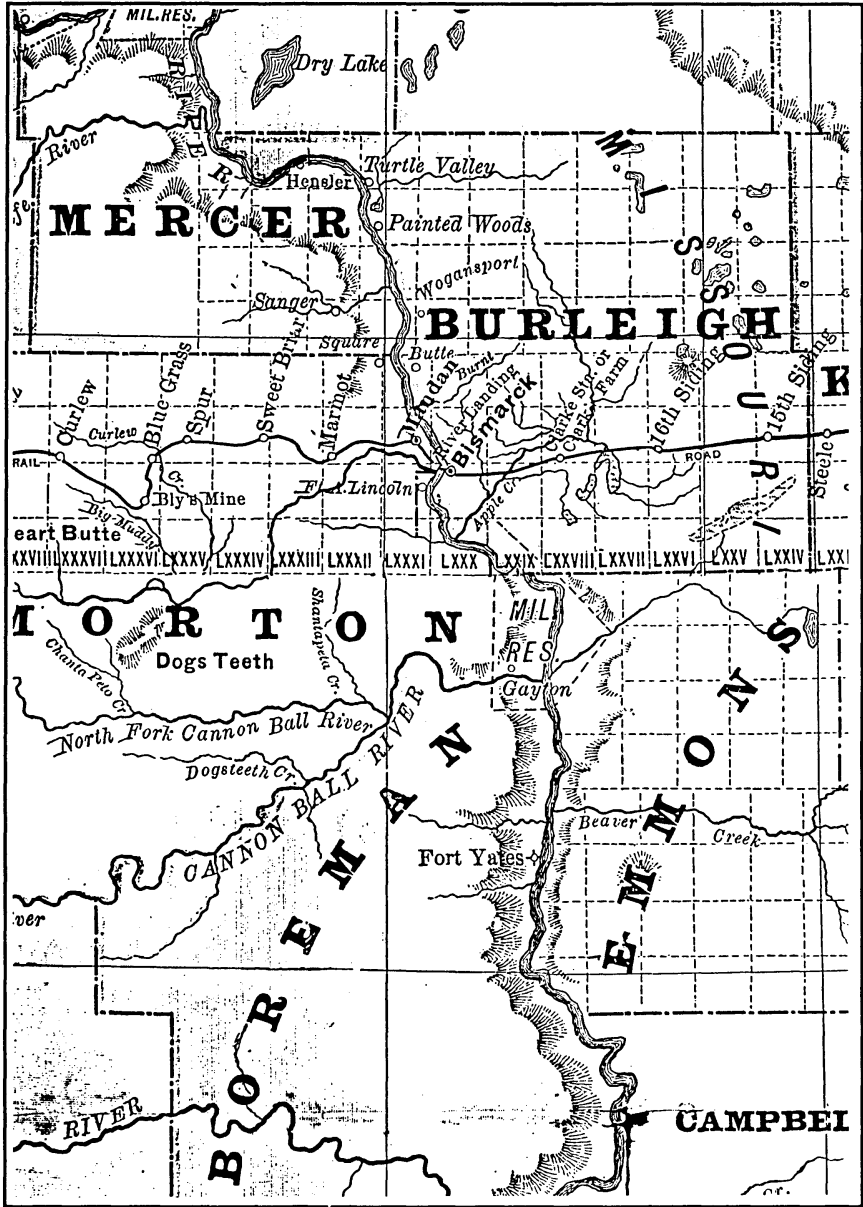


Fig. 5. Detail from Rand McNally's 1882 map of Dakota showing the center of the Territory.

may be more complex. In the next few pages we will provide a few examples of how this material has helped resolve questions about name origins, especially those that have persistent local stories of a suspicious nature.

It is sometimes heard, for example, that Rapid City, South Dakota's second largest city, was so named because it experienced *rapid* growth when it was founded in 1876, shortly after the opening of the Black Hills.⁹ The city is on Rapid Creek, a stream that rushes out of the Black Hills to join the Cheyenne River. Which name came first? The index tells us that Rapid Creek appears on Warren's 1855 map, twenty-one years before the town began. Another simple example is a small lake in Day County, in northeastern South Dakota, called *Lynn Lake*. For reasons we cannot determine, local legend insists that it was named for the singer Jenny Lind (1820-87), known as the Swedish nightingale, despite the fact that the two names are spelled so differently.¹⁰ A better source for the name is Senator Lewis F. Linn (1795-1843) of Missouri. The index reveals that *Lake Linn*—note the spelling—appears on Nicollet's map, long before Jenny Lind's immense popularity in America. The name on Nicollet's map is almost invisible, half-hidden by hachure marks, but it was picked up in the careful indexing process. It is impossible to know exactly to which lake in an area of many glacial lakes Nicollet refers, as the journal does not mention it, but the circumstantial evidence is strong, and Senator Linn from Missouri was one of Nicollet's supporters (Barclay 282).

Not far from this lake is a little community called *Hillhead*. Locally, the story is that the railroad builders named the location after completing a stretch of rail that came to the top of a substantial hill (Ehrensperger 69). Once again, Nicollet's map shows the flaw in this story; the northern end of a curious landform known as the *Coteau des Prairies* is labeled in both Sioux and English: "Re Ipahah or Head of the Coteau des Prairies." The word *Re*, its spelling reflecting French-speaking Nicollet's understanding of the rough aspirant usually written with the letter *h*, hence *He*, is the general Sioux word for any high ground. *Ipahah* is one of several forms of the word meaning "top," including top of the head (Buechel). *Hillhead* is thus a literal translation of "Re Ipahah."

One final and rather complex example should suffice. A relatively minor stream in southeastern South Dakota is called the *Vermillion*

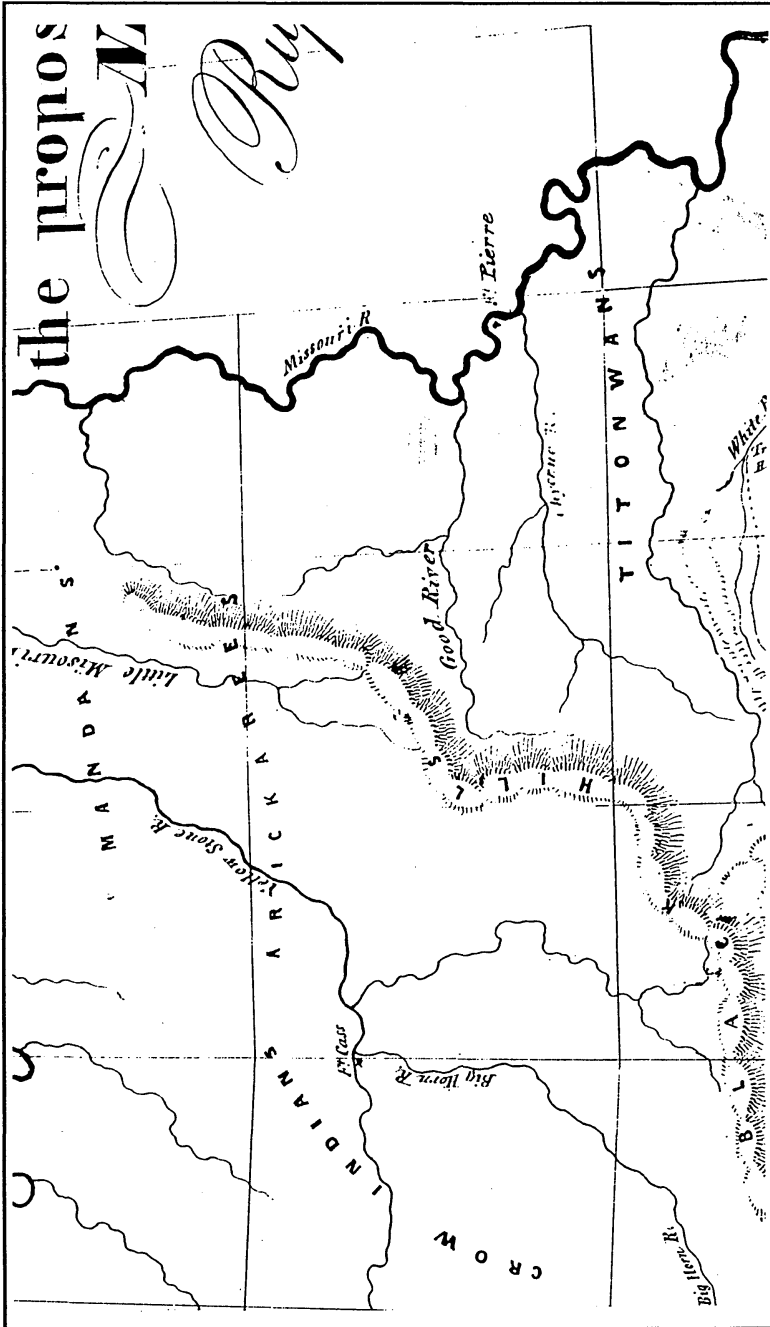


Fig. 6. Detail from Sage's map showing the area west of the Missouri River.

River. It enters the Missouri near the town of Vermillion, home of the University of South Dakota. The river was called (and still is) *Wasesha* by the Sioux, a word which means red clay, a substance used as red paint and apparently once but no longer found somewhere along its banks. The French word *vermillon* (English *vermilion*) was commonly used for this clay. When Lewis and Clark arrived at this river on August 24, 1804, Clark entered its name in his journal as *White Stone Creek* (Moulton 2:505); when they returned two years later he entered *Redstone River* (Thwaites 5:374). On the published map of 1814, it is *White Stone River* (Moulton 1:plate 126). Nicollet's map is the first to label it *Vermillion*, but the name *Wasesha* is also included. The confusion over this name may be resolved by looking more closely at the names taken from Nicollet's map. The first tributary to the Vermillion River is called, on this map *Mankasan Fork*. The word in Sioux means "white earth" (*maka san*) or "white clay" (Buechel). It is likely that confusion between these two streams led to the confusion of names. A still unresolved – and perhaps unresolvable – question is this: The stream labeled *Makasan Fork* is known today as *Clay Creek*. All of these features are in *Clay County*. There is documentary evidence that this county was named for Henry Clay (Moses 38). In this case, the maps do not answer all of the questions; they simply raise more.

These few examples give a rough idea of some of the ways that early maps can provide a reasonable basis for speculations about name origins. For more definite conclusions, maps alone are rarely sufficient, and it is important to consult narratives such as those by Lewis and Clark and Nicollet where possible. All names are subject to misspelling and it is often difficult to determine whether a name is a legitimate variant or simply a confused spelling. This common problem is especially acute with Indian names. For example, that prominent feature known as *Big Bend* (also called *Grand Detour*) also bears its Sioux name on Nicollet's map: *Karmichigah Bend*, which can be translated "it bends back upon itself." Later map makers read the final *h* in Nicollet's *Karmichigah* as an *n*, and several derivative maps list the bend as *Karmichigan*, as if it had some connection to the name *Michigan*. Should this be considered a legitimate variant or simply a cartographer's error?

A final word of warning should be kept in mind when using early maps: locations are usually quite imprecise and many cartographers placed features on their maps on the basis of hearsay. The case of the

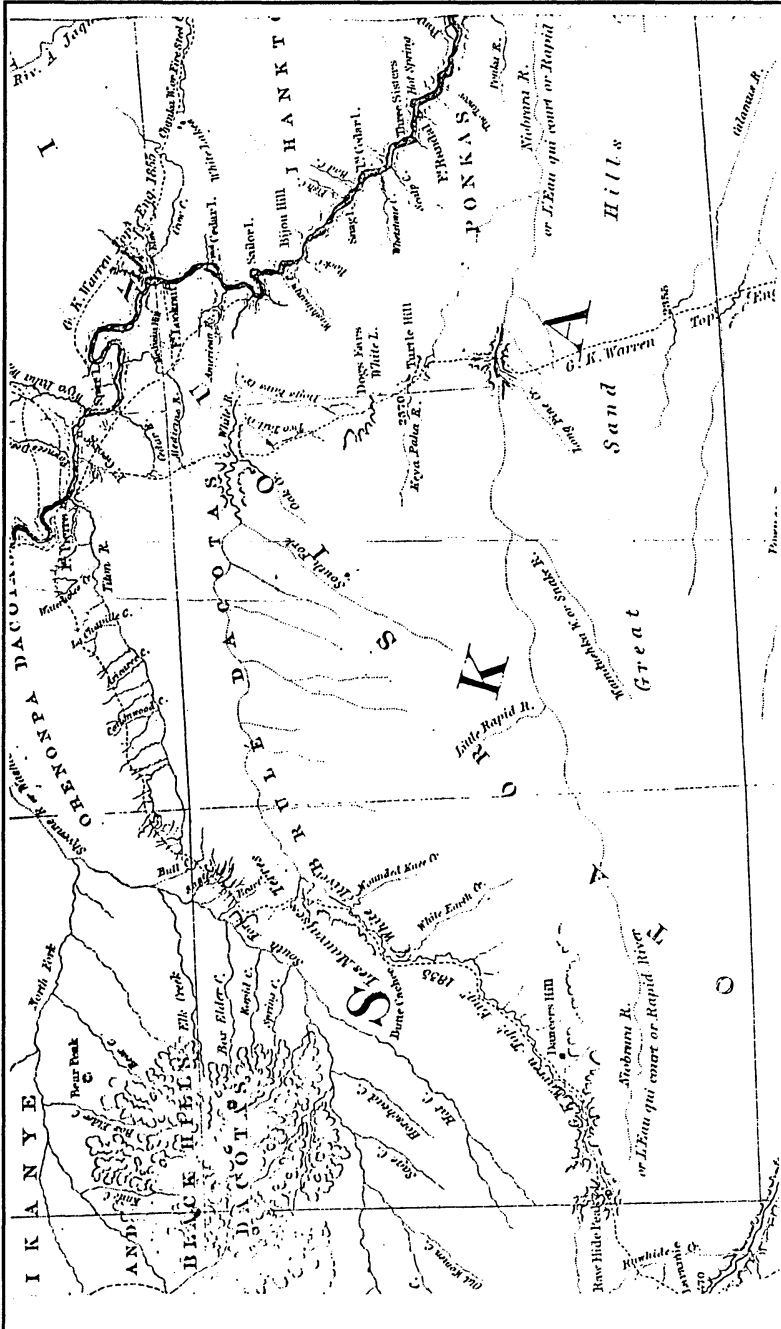


Fig. 7. Detail from Warren's map showing the area that is now southwestern South Dakota and northwestern Nebraska.

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wandering Black Hills makes this point clearly. Surveying skills before the middle of the nineteenth century were very inexact; distances were usually measured by pacing or guesswork, directions were fixed by compasses that may or may not have been adjusted for magnetic declination, and longitude was impossible to determine without extremely accurate time pieces.

Maps are crucial tools for the study of placenames, but they are tools that must be used carefully and critically. We hope that our experience in working with maps of this one limited area can be beneficial to others.

The University of South Dakota, Vermillion

Notes

1. This is a revision of a paper given at Laval University in August 1987, during the XVth International Conference of Onomastic Sciences.

2. Since this writing, Douglas Wick's book on North Dakota town names has come to our attention. Also, significant research in that state's settlement names is being done by Frank Vyzralek.

3. The early stages of this project predated the ongoing efforts of the U. S. Board on Geographic Names to develop a complete list of placenames in the United States and was a contributor to the recently published South Dakota volume of *The National Geographer*.

4. See list of Works Cited for Cartobibliography. The most thorough discussion of early maps of the West can be found in Carl Wheat's five-volume annotated atlas.

The cartouche on the 1718 lists Claude Delisle as the cartographer, but scholars agree that the credit should go to Guillaume (Wood 32). We have normalized the form of the family name, which appears as *Del'Isle* on the 1703 map and *de L'Isle* in other documents.

5. These maps are still available on the historical map market; gift-shop facsimiles are often seen, usually labeled "Louisiana" if sold in New Orleans and "Colonial America" if sold in the East.

6. A popular history of Sioux City, Iowa, makes this astounding statement: "In 1839, Jean N. Nicollet, the scientist, and *discoverer of the Mississippi River, three years before*, ascended the Missouri...to Fort Pierre" (Schmidt 47, our emphasis).

7. In addition to his importance as an explorer, Frémont was a popular politician and was the Republican Party's very first candidate for president, losing to James Buchanan in 1856. More successful was the party's second candidate, Abraham Lincoln. The marriage between Frémont and Jessie Benton, opposed by her father, was one of the great romantic episodes of the century, and even today is a source of romantic fiction, for example David Nevin's 1983 *Dream West*, also made into a TV miniseries.

8. Edmund and Martha Bray provide an English translation of the journal that Nicollet kept in his native French.

9. This story was related by University of South Dakota student Tim Rensch, a native of Rapid City.

10. The late Herman P. Chilson of Webster, South Dakota, regional historian, book collector, and philanthropist, held this view. Charlie Ewalt, a University of South Dakota student who researched Day County placenames, found this view to be widely held in the county. The legend even credits the first woman homesteader, Julia Bakke, with selecting the name.

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