

Miscousing – Wisconsin

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Abstract

The name *Wisconsin*, never satisfactorily explained, was first recorded as *Miscousing*. Was this form due to dialect variation in Indian sources, to mishearing by early recorders, or to some other cause? Another suggestion is that the *M*-form could have been an echo of an easterly name, *Miscou*, well known to French navigators.

The name *Wisconsin* has resisted all attempts to explain its meaning. Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, the surrounding states, have clearly-understood Indian names, and *Wisconsin* is certainly Indian too. Further, the state was named for the chief river, a customary pattern. *Wisconsin*, however, presents difficulties of both form and meaning, yet it may be useful to review the question, especially to consider the earliest form of the name: *Miscousing*, or *Mescousing*, soon displaced by *Wisconsin*. The *M*-form has not, I think, been given sufficient attention.²

It is well known that Samuel de Champlain, founder of Quebec, had the hope (like Columbus and others before him) of finding a western passage to the Orient. Champlain's favored route was to be via the St. Lawrence River, the Great Lakes, and a fabled "Great River" beyond, leading to the Pacific Ocean. To make the exploration into Indian Territory, he saw to it that interpreters were trained, among them Jean Nicolet, a young emigré from France. Placed out among the Algonquin Indians north of the St. Lawrence and near Lake Nipissing for some ten years, Nicolet lived as one of them, learning their language and ways of life. Then, at Champlain's direction, he left Quebec on July 1, 1634, with a fleet of two canoes. At what became Three Rivers he staked out the fort to begin the settlement; then, in one canoe, with a crew of seven Huron Indians, he headed west. Passing the Sault Ste. Marie and Straits of Mackinac, he entered Green Bay, the northwest branch of Lake Michigan, going ashore ultimately at the mouth of the present Menominee River. For the ceremonial landing he dressed himself in an elaborate Chinese-like robe, bearing out his expectation of meeting Orientals from the Pacific.

Nicolet is the first European known to have penetrated so far into what became Wisconsin. It is altogether probable that he inquired about a "great river"; certainly he went up the Fox River to the present Lake Winnebago and met with the Winnebago Indians, whose name the French wishfully translated as "les gens de mer" or "people of the sea,"³ and who were reported as "coming from the west," all of which seemed further to support the hope of finding the passage to the Pacific. Yet Nicolet, if he did portage from the Fox River to the Wisconsin, did not go as far as the Mississippi but turned south from the Mascoutens' settlement toward that of the Illinois.⁴ No record of the name of the river has been found from this time. Nicolet died shortly after his return, and it remained for Jolliet and Marquette, thirty-nine years later, to portage from the Fox to the Wisconsin and go down it to the Mississippi. The earliest known record of the name of the River comes from Jolliet's map of 1672,⁵ and the form given there is *Misconsing*.

The accompanying tabulation (Table 1) shows clearly enough the confusions that come from uncertain and conflicting sources of evidence, from perhaps inexact hearing and recording in the first place, from scribal errors and editorial practices, from the time lag in updating maps. The initial conflict between *M-* forms and *Ou-* forms certainly involves sounds. The difference between *-n-* and *-u-* is more likely graphic—a very common confusion in written (and later, printed) documents. The presence or absence of *g* in the final syllable is probably only orthographic, the *g* being dropped to make it more normally French. The *e* rather than *i* in Marquette's account is probably a mistake; he is the only one to use it, and it was soon corrected.

Summarizing the map evidence, *M-* was clearly the earliest; not till 1681 was it displaced by a /w/ sound, spelled *Ou-* since French has no *w* except in borrowed foreign words. (Internal *-ŕ-* spells *ou* but neither is pronounced /w/.)⁶ Thus the *M-* form prevails for about nine years and then is rapidly displaced. Was the /w/ sound found to be more accurate and the *M-* due to mishearing or misinformation? Or was the *M-/W-* difference one of dialect, as reported by or derived from different Indians? Or did the mapmakers do some editing or make mistakes of their own? Or, finally, could the explorers' records, their maps and accounts have been influenced by prior expectations? Though Nicolet left no written record, he must have carried the name back orally. If so, Jolliet and Marquette, when they came following his track thirty-nine years later may have expected to hear an *M-* form.

Table 1. Map spellings of the name.

1672	Jolliet Carte de la decouverte...	Riviere Misconsin*
1674	Marquette map	Miscousing
1674	Marquette account: "The river on which we embarked is called Mescousing ... We entered the Missisipi happily the 17th June." Later in the account he refers to its entry into the Mississippi as:	Mescous
1679	Franquelin map (follows Jolliet)	Riviere de Miscousing
1681	Franquelin map (follows Marquette)	Riviere Miscous
1681	Thevenot (Paris)	Missiosing
1683	Hennepin (Paris)	R. des ouiscousins
1688	Morden (London)	Miscousin
1688	Coronelli (Paris)	Miscousin
1694	Coronelli (Venice)	R. Ouisconsin
1698	Hennepin (Amsterdam)	Riviere Ouisconsin
1700	Delisle (Paris)	R. Onisconsin
1703	Lahontan (the Hague)	R. Ouaricon-sin**
1704	Hennepin (Leyden)	R. Ouisconsin
1705	Nicholas de Fer (Paris)	Ouisconsin ou Misconsin Riv.

For reproductions of most of these maps see Karpinski. Others are in the map collection of the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

* Vogel reports this as *miskoasing* (182). I have checked Gravier's reproduction of Jolliet's map under magnification and read *miskonsing*. The reading is indeed difficult; it might easily be taken as *u* rather than *n* or *a*. Also, Jolliet made more than one map. At the lower left corner of Jolliet's map we find "Mer Vermeille ou est La Califournie par ou on peut aller au Perou au Japon et ala chine." So Jolliet also believed, or accepted, the great hope. Frontenac refers to this again in 1673.

** This was the map which led George R. Stewart to offer his explanation of the name *Oregon*.

Perhaps such an expectation actually influenced the way they heard and recorded the name.

As to the matter of dialect difference, the Indians whom Nicolet met were certainly Menomini, Mascoutens, and Illinois; perhaps also Potawatomi, and Ojibwa, all Algonquian. He also dealt with the Winnebago, a Siouan people. Dictionaries of these and related languages (Ottawa, Cree, Micmac, etc.) give inconclusive evidence, but it is at least

certain that the *M-/W-* difference is not dialectal; at most it may be due to an unrealized morphological difference, but this is now impossible to prove.

My authority for this is the late Fr. James A. Geary, to whom I put a series of questions in a letter in 1953, he being then the foremost authority on Proto-Algonquian. Fr. Geary responded generously. Following is a digest of his reply, including his explanation of the name *Wisconsin*.

1. The initial letters *M-* and *W-* are not phonetic variants, nor are they Algonquian dialectal variants. The *M-* forms are primarily graphic variants for which European editors of LaSalle are probably responsible.
2. There may be dialectal variation between *-e-* and *-i-* of the first syllable. If the Proto-Algonquian vowel was **e* it would appear differently: as *-e-* in Outagami and sometimes Menomini, but as *-i-* in Ojibwa, Potawatomi, etc.
3. Regarding the *-kon-* and *-kou-* of the second syllable, one is a misreading of the other, but which? In Ojibwa *n* is phonemic, so the written *n* does not indicate nasalization of the preceding vowel.
4. The final *-in* and *-sin* or *-ing* and *-sing* are verbal terminations, the first two indicative, the second two conjunctive. "The final *g* ... is certainly not a localizing suffix (though it has often been called that)"; *-n* and *-ng* "are identical in their phonetic form."
5. Baraga's "*miskosi* it is red" is an animate form, not applicable to a river; it might refer to rocks.⁷ Ojibwa *wiskon-* would (tentatively) mean "heavy fog, mist with violence or impetuosity"; *-sin* 'rapid motion downward' (referring to the rapidity of the river and the fall of several hundred feet in its 600-mile course; so the name in Ojibwa, Fox, and similar Algonquian languages of the region could be descriptive of the river: "it rushes down impetuously (violently) with mist (fog or perhaps spray)."⁸ Fr. Geary concludes: "I feel that this is the correct etymology, with only the faintest doubt (and I cannot give any specific reason for a doubt)."⁸

So much for *Wisconsin* and back to the *M-* spellings. I have suggested that *Miscousing*, *Meskousing*, *Meskous*, and variants, before they were even written down, may have been influenced by oral forms, or a recollection of oral forms. This is unprovable, of course, yet the pos-

sibility needs to be considered. The explorations were undertaken always in the hope and even expectation of finding a passage to the Pacific. This had been Jacques Cartier's goal; it continued the same for Champlain, Nicolet, Jolliet and Marquette, LaSalle, Hennepin, and others. The effort was an ongoing one: the later explorers must have had their predecessors' achievements very much in mind.

Let us return to Cartier and his discovery of the St. Lawrence River. On his voyage in 1534, on July 3, as he sailed toward the Gaspé Peninsula, he rounded an island guarding the Baie des Chaleurs and pointing toward the Bay of St. Lawrence (See Fig. 1). Cartier called it *Cap d'Esperance*, again expressing his hope that it might lead to the much-sought route.⁹ This name did not survive, but its Indian name, *Miscou*, did and is to be found almost without exception on maps thereafter as a prominent landmark on the way to the Baie des Chaleurs, Gaspé, and the St. Lawrence.¹⁰

It seems more than possible that the name *Miscou*, for the island so well known to all navigators of that region, may have been echoed in at least one other place: *Miscouche* is the name of a point, an island, a bay, cove, and village in the southwest part (lot 7) of Prince Edward Island. I have found no claim that *Miscouche* has any connection with *Miscou*. They are both Micmac, but may have been applied locally and independently of each other. Prince Edward Island had been first sighted by Champlain July 23, 1623, and settlement was attempted not long after (Clark 95), but I have not been able to find the date of settlement of *Miscouche*. Perhaps this may be left to Canadian onomasticians. Whatever the fact, those who sailed for *Miscouche* Island surely knew of *Miscou* Island. If there was no actual echo, the coincidence is at least striking, considering time, place, and the importance of *Miscou* to navigators. But this is no more than surmise.

To surmise further that the explorers of Wisconsin, Nicolet and later Jolliet and especially Marquette, may have made in their minds some connection between the well-known landmark, *Miscou* Island, and the much-sought river is perhaps less implausible. I suggest that when, on the spot, they *heard* the name *Ouisconsin*, it made a connection in their minds, and later recollecting *Miscou*, they mapped and recorded the river's name as *Miscousin* and *Meskous*. Better information coming only a few years later quickly drove out the *M*- form in favor of French *Ou*- and later English *W*-.

This is no more than a suggestion; to push it farther would, I think, be wishful thinking. Let me quote, as appropriate to the occasion,

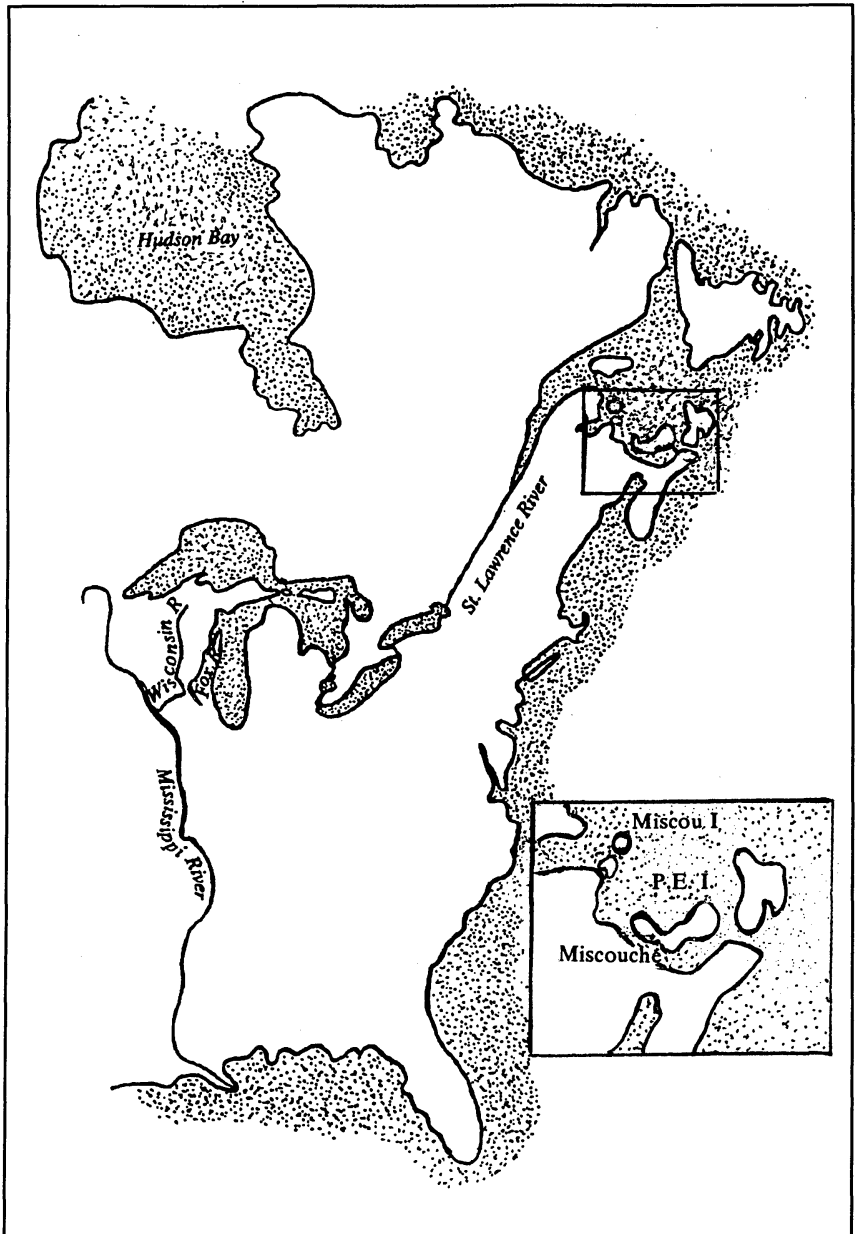


Fig. 1. Eastern North America, showing the Wisconsin River, Miscou Island, and the village of Miscouche on Prince Edward Island (P.E.I.).

Cassidy's Law of Etymology: "Possibilities, no matter how many, do not constitute a probability; probabilities, no matter how many, do not constitute a proof." Ipse dixit. Yet the possibility is there. The age-old dream of finding a passage to the Orient which motivated the foremost French navigators, and the prominent position of the name *Miscou* on all the maps, the island pointing to the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, must have been a fact known to all. Perhaps Nicolet knew it; without question Jolliet and Marquette did. The river that took them at last to the Mississippi may, when they first heard it named, have echoed "Miscou." We shall never know.

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Notes

1. It is a pleasure to write this note of thanks to Kelsie, who has toiled mightily for ANS for so many years so dependably. It would have been much less without him.

2. For the most recent summary treatment of the subject see Vogel.

3. *Winnebago* is an Algonquian name given to the Siouan people who moved about east of the Mississippi River in the eighteenth century and after in lands mostly inhabited by Algonquians. A more accurate translation of the name is "ill-smelling-water people." See my article, "The Names of Green Bay."

4. It has been claimed that Nicolet portaged from the Fox to the Wisconsin. He certainly heard of the portage and marked it on his map. However, there is no firm evidence that he reached either the Wisconsin or the Mississippi.

5. Jolliet made manually more than one copy of this map, and it was the basis for Marquette's map of 1674, which made various changes. For a comparison of the two with their differences, see Butterfield. See also the articles by Gravier (which reprints Jolliet's map) and Sulte.

6. The earliest use of *W-* that I have found is on the American Lewis Evans' map, Philadelphia 1755: *Wisconsin R.* But almost all French maps have *Ou-* and English maps follow the French into the nineteenth century. The first French map to adopt *W-* is Delamarche's of 1790 (Karpinski).

7. On the basis of Baraga's dictionary the "red" explanation has been a favored one. Various "red" physiographic features have been pointed out as possible referents. But if the *M-* form of the name was an error, such explanations become invalid.

8. Geary's information has remained in my files since we corresponded in 1953. I regret that I was unable to carry it further to publication at that time, but because I knew nothing about the Indian languages, I could not feel confident in judging it. I still depend entirely on Geary's authority. However, his explanation would suit very well with the early description of the Wisconsin River (see Vogel 184). A.G. Ellis writes: "The Wisconsin above Point Bas, is a succession of rapids and eddies; most of the former surge over rocky bottoms, with a wild current of ten to twenty miles an hour, the channel broken and divided" (439). Henry Legler noted: "The popular translation [of Wisconsin] is 'wild, rushing channel,' a definition which accords well with the nature of the stream, but which nevertheless is of doubtful authenticity" (39).

9. W. F. Ganong writes of Miscou: "Cap d'Esperance was given to its northern point by Cartier in 1534 because in rounding it he hoped he had found in Bay Chaleur the western passage." He notes also that the first identifiable French resident of Miscou, 1623, was Raymond de la Ralde and that a Jesuit mission was established 1634 ("History" 82-83). Andrew Clark notes settlement on Miscou for fishing and gardening from the 1640s forward (95-96). As to the meaning of the name, Ganong, the chief early scholar of Canadian nomenclature, has written under the list entry *Miscou*: "The suggestion ...

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that this name may be derived from an Algonquin word meaning red, describing the low red cliffs about it proves groundless, since as I have found by personal observation, no such cliffs exist" ("Additions" 35).

10. Maps showing Miscou Island include Sanson (Paris, 1650): *Miscou*; Sanson (Paris, 1656): *Miscou*; Du Val (Paris, 1669): *Miscou*; Du Val (Paris, 1678): *Miscou*; 1685 Creuxins (Paris, 1685): *Miscoue*; 1685 Jumeau (1685): *I. Mischkou*; all others spell *Miscou*.

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