

# Weaubleau from French Bois Blanc 'White Woods': A Missouri Toponymic Mystery Solved

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## Abstract

Full credit for solving the origin of *Weaubleau* (Creek) goes to Walter Schroeder, who noticed an 1841 document specifying that *Weaubleau* derives from French *Bois Blanc* 'white woods.' Several changes occurred to disguise this *bois blanc* origin, and the result was a placename that virtually defied a proper analysis. Include me among those who stumbled in an early attempt to determine the name's derivation.

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Coulet du Gard ... states, "To the researcher, the historian ... we present this study in the hope that it will ... lead to many more discoveries on the subject." I add my hope, also. (Harder 312)

Weaubleau Creek is a small stream in Hickory and St. Clair Counties in west-central Missouri, and until recently the origin of its name has been obscure. Bernice E. Johnson's 1933 thesis treats the term as being of Indian origin, but neither the specific Indian language nor the term's original meaning are given. Robert Ramsay's 1952 book presents an interesting progression, going from a confident listing of *Weaubleau* among the Indian terms (39), to treating it as an Indian term "unsolved as yet" (42), to simply listing it along with sixty-three other unsolved names offered in the hope that "some readers under whose eyes these pages may chance to fall will have suggestions for solving some of our remaining puzzles" (119).

For the record, here is the treatment in the Ramsay file cards,<sup>2</sup> located at the University of Missouri in Columbia:

Johnson (1933)

\*\*Weaubleau Creek

Pronounced wáblò krik  
(earlier Lime River (?); also spelled Wablo and Weablo.) A  
tributary of the Osage River in the Eastern part of St. Clair County.

Rises in Hickory County. Coues identifies [it] with a "Lime River"... on Pike's Map of 1806. In his notes Coues gives the variant spellings Wablo and Weablo for Weaubleau, which correspond better to the present pronunciation, but are not recorded elsewhere. The name is of Indian origin, but its original meaning is not preserved. (Coues' "Expedition of Pike" 1896), note, 383; Hist. Henry and St. Clair (1883), 889.

Despite the mystery concerning *Weaubleau Creek*, in 1987 I confidently proposed in print that the name derives from French *eau bleue* 'blue water.' I surmised that the spelling *bleue* had changed to *bleau* for symmetry with the first part of the name and that the *W-* in *Weaubleau* must have resulted from a /w/-type glide appearing between "to" and "Eaubleau" in a context like "to Eaubleau." Later settlers who did not know French assumed that the /w/ was an integral part of the name.

I further assumed that the variant spellings *Weablo* and then *Wablo* represented merely simplifications of the lengthy *Weaubleau*; and these spellings with *-a-* might be the reason that the name is now pronounced "WAHbloh" rather than "WOHbloh" (Cohen, *Interesting Missouri Place Names* 38).

It was all very logical, and I was sure that I had hit upon the correct interpretation. I was wrong.

A stunning piece of information came to me in a letter, dated January 7, 1988, that I received from Walter Schroeder,<sup>3</sup> Chairman, Geography Department, University of Missouri-Columbia:

While doing research for a study on the land forms of Missouri, I encountered the following, which should be of interest, since Ramsay indicates that *Weaubleau* is an unsolved place name. ...

"The name of this creek (Bois Blanc) has been tortured into 'Warblo' by the present inhabitants."

Professor Schroeder found this reference in a report to the Missouri General Assembly of an 1839 geological survey (King). His letter continues:

The fact that the name is pronounced Wah-blo, rather than Woe-blo, helps this historical explanation, although the traditional "war-blow"<sup>4</sup> doesn't. There were precious few people in the region in 1839; Warsaw was laid out in 1837 from scratch.

In a more recent letter (September 27, 1990), Schroeder provides additional information:

I might add that I ran across the spelling "Little Wablow" for a tributary to Weaubleau Creek on page 3 of "Survey of the Osage River, Missouri" ... [U.S. Congress] ... If this spelling was used by persons talking to locals, then it could be very close to the pronunciation of the locals. It suggests that the pronunciation today must already have been in place in the 1880s, whatever significance that has.

I now see that we deal with the loss of *B-* in *Bois*, leaving *ois*, i.e. /wa/. Final *c* in French words ending in *-nc* is virtually always silent (exception: *donc*), despite the liberties that American advertisers sometimes take in this regard (*Chablis Blanc*). So, with *-c* silent, that left *-an-*, a nasal vowel which no self-respecting American frontiersman would pronounce, and it was probably rendered as a schwa: /wáblə/. The schwa in /wáblə/ then became /ō/, apparently by hypercorrection. On the basis of variant pronunciations such as /təbækō/ and /təbækə/ or the state name /ōhájō/ and /ōhájə/—with the /ō/ forms generally regarded as standard, /wáblə/ was evidently judged to be incorrect. So /wáblə/ was "corrected" to /wablō/. Once this *-ō* arose, the French spelling of the sound was used, *eau*. And in a further development, this final *eau* was employed in the first syllable too, either because of symmetry or because of the intentional insertion of the French word for "water," and the result, *Weaubleau*, was a name that virtually defied a correct etymological analysis.

Incidentally, white woods, specifically birch and white oak trees, do exist near Weaubleau Creek.

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## Notes

1. This article is an expansion of a working paper which appeared in 1989 in *Comments on Etymology*, a series I have edited since 1971. A full set is available at the reference desk at the library of the University of Missouri—Rolla.

2. Between 1928 and 1945 Robert Ramsay directed eighteen MA theses on Missouri placenames. A total of about 35,000 placenames were treated. This information was then typed onto 3x5 cards and filed alphabetically, intended ultimately for publication as the extensive Missouri Placename Survey. This project has bogged down, but the very valuable files are available at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, 23 Ellis Library, Columbia, MO 65201.

3. Walter Schroeder is not related to Adolf Schroeder, professor-emeritus of German, University of Missouri—Columbia, and former director of the Missouri Placename Survey. Both men pronounce their names to rhyme with *raider*.

4. The "War-blow" pronunciation is merely a variation of "Wah-blow," just as some St. Louisans speak of "Warshington" or say they have to "warsh" their hands.

### Works Cited

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