

Placenames From Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha"

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Abstract

No American literary work has had more influence on the adoption of Indian placenames in North America than Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* (1855). At least a hundred placenames, not counting duplications, are traceable to this poem. All (except those named for the title character) are from Algonquian or Siouan languages and reflect to a degree the influence of John Tanner, Mary Eastman, and Lewis H. Morgan. The names are taken not only from mythological figures, but also from aboriginal terms for flora, fauna, and cultural objects.

Perhaps no single literary figure has generated more names for the American map than Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who published his *Song of Hiawatha* in 1855. Romantic interest in the Indian, kindled in an earlier generation by James Fenimore Cooper, was still in vogue, and the work of the Cambridge bard was an immediate success. We are not concerned here with critical debates about this poem, which is still studied in some schools. Our interest is in the names which it contains, which are mainly authentic American Indian names, taken from the works of qualified people.

The name of the principal character is that of an Iroquois folk hero transformed into a composite legend of the Ojibwa of the Lake Superior region. The legendary spirit hero of the Ojibwa, Manabozho (variously spelled), is the figure to whom Longfellow attaches the name *Hiawatha*, which is Iroquoian in origin. The tales which formed the foundation of the Hiawatha story were culled partly from the voluminous writings of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Indian agent at Sault Ste. Marie (see Williams), with some minor influence from Mrs. Mary H. Eastman's tales of the Sioux and perhaps also from John Tanner's captivity narrative.

In his idyllic ballad of native life, Longfellow introduced all the feathered, furred, and scaled denizens of the piney wilderness. To each he gave both its Ojibwa name, or an approximation thereof, and the

English equivalent. Orthographic similarity suggests that many of his terms were gleaned from lists first published in Tanner's captivity narrative in 1830, which had such a limited sale that it was not reissued until 1956 (James).

The American map contains over a hundred placenames which are identical with many Ojibwa and some Siouan names of people, flora, fauna, or other objects which are identical with those in *Hiawatha*. I have not been able to determine the date when each of them was adopted as a placename, but the available information indicates that most names here investigated were adopted after the appearance of the poem.

There can be no doubt that places named for the principal hero, **Hiawatha**, owe their names directly to the poem. His name was not only previously unknown to all but a few scholars; it was also spelled differently. Henry Lewis Morgan, for example, spelled it *Ha-yo-went-ha* (1: 60ff; 2: 234). Today the name as used by Longfellow is borne by villages or towns in Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, Utah, and West Virginia, besides Hiawatha National Forest in Michigan, and lakes in Florida, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania, along with parks and other features in several states.

Second only in importance to Hiawatha is his grandmother, **Nokomis**, "Daughter of the Moon," who reared him "By the shores of Gitche Gumeé" (27²). She is commemorated by town or village names in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Virginia, and Saskatchewan, a township in Iowa, two lakes in Wisconsin, a pond near Newport, Maine, and a post office, lake, and park within the city of Minneapolis. The name is Ojibwa for "grandmother" (Baraga 2: 309).

Next in chronological order in the poem comes **Wenonah**:

Fair Nokomis bore a daughter.
And she called her name Wenonah,
As the first born of her daughters. (26)

Wenonah, who inexplicably bears a Siouan name applied, as the last line indicates, to first-born daughters (Riggs 577), becomes the mother of Hiawatha after a forbidden tryst with **Mudjekeewis**, the West Wind. In Oregon's Cascade Range, Mudjekeewis Mountain (el. 6,616') commemorates Hiawatha's extra-terrestrial father. Wenonah dies in childbirth, but her name lives on. As spelled by Longfellow, with the final *h*, it is found in Illinois, New Jersey, and West Virginia. As *Wenona*, minus

the *h*, it is found again in Illinois, as well as Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, and North Carolina. Where the name is spelled *Winona* (substituting *i* for *e*) as it is in Minnesota and seventeen other states, its origin is perhaps from the legend, published by William Keating in 1825, of the Sioux maiden who threw herself from a bluff along the Mississippi rather than accept a forced marriage to a man she did not love (Keating 1: 280–83). Still other variants of this name, of uncertain origin, are *Weona*, Arkansas, *Wiona* Cliffs, Maryland, and *Wynona*, Oklahoma.

The next principal figure in the Hiawatha story is **Minnehaha**, known as "Laughing Water," destined to become the bride of Hiawatha and to climax the story by her untimely death. Longfellow provides a romantic notion of how she was named by her father, the Dakota arrowmaker:

And he named her from the river,
From the water-fall he named her,
Minnehaha, Laughing Water. (45)

Minnehaha Creek and Falls, now within the city of Minneapolis, were named prior to the writing of Longfellow's epic, and were in fact the source of the name for him. Mrs. Mary Eastman's book, *Dahcotah, or Life and Legends of the Sioux* (1849), was, according to William Jones, "clearly the source of the heroine's name" (869–70). It was here also that it was romantically if imprecisely defined as "Laughing Water." According to Stephen R. Riggs' *Dakota-English Dictionary*, this name was formed by combining *Mini*, the general word for "water," with *ha-ha*, the word for "waterfalls, so called from the *curling* of the waters; especially *the Falls of St. Anthony*" (Riggs 160, 315).

Minnehaha is today the name of a county in South Dakota; of villages, post offices, or railway stations in Colorado, Indiana, and Washington; of Minnehaha Springs, West Virginia; of creeks in Arizona, Idaho, and Iowa, a canyon in Nevada, and a small lake in Cheyenne, Wyoming. In its present form, everywhere identical, the name is without doubt from the Hiawatha story, since Mrs. Eastman spelled it differently: *mine-hah-hah*.

The name of **Wabeno**, a town in Forest County, Wisconsin, may commemorate the name of the magician in *Hiawatha*. As Longfellow indicated, the name signifies a sorcerer.³

Last of the human and semi-human figures in *Hiawatha* to gain immortality on the map is Osseo, "Son of the Evening Star" (118), whose

name is found appropriately in Michigan, Minnesota, Ontario, and Wisconsin, where the Ojibwa did and do reside.

Wabun, the East-Wind, "From the regions of the morning,/ From the shining land of Wabun" (215), merits a placename in Ontario and Virginia.⁴ **Shawondasse**, the South-Wind, like the other winds (except the West-Wind), a half-brother of Hiawatha, is probably the source of the name *Shawondasse* in Dubuque County, Iowa. **Keewaydin**, the Northwest-Wind, may be the inspiration for the name of Keewayden Key, Florida, and perhaps of Kewadin, Michigan, although each is spelled slightly differently. The name in still other spellings, such as *Keewatin*, may originate in other legends, published in various places.

Prominently featured in *Hiawatha* is the legend of the hero's three-day wrestling match with **Mondamin**, who, defeated and buried, rises again in the form of a miraculous new plant, maize, or corn. Only one placename, of a town in Iowa, currently recalls this charming myth of Mondamin, and it is located where it ought to be. *Mondamin* is the Ojibwa name for Iowa's principal crop.

Whenever "some lucky maiden/Found a red ear in the husking,/ Found a maize-ear red as blood is,/ 'Nushka!' cried they all together." So goes the poem. *Nushka* is the name of a lake in Cass County, Minnesota. Warren Upham mistook it for the exclamation "Look" (90). It appears, however, to be related to Ojibwa *nisakosi* 'an ear of corn' (Baraga 1: 59).

At Hiawatha's wedding feast, Chibiabos sings:

"Onaway! Awake, beloved!
Thou the wild-flower of the forest!
Thou the wild-bird of the prairie! ... " (112)

Onaway has been called by several writers an Ojibwa word meaning "awaken." Nothing like this, however, is in Baraga's *Otchipwe Dictionary*. *Onaway* may be, instead, a mythical character who is the object of the love song of Chibiabos. Whatever its meaning, the word caught the fancy of name-givers. *Onaway* is the name of a town in Presque Isle County, Michigan, and of a state park in adjacent Cheboygan County. It is also the name of a village in Latah County, Idaho. Slightly altered to *Onoway*, it is the name of a town northwest of Edmonton, Alberta. The name of *Onawa* Lake in Piscataquis County, Maine, is borrowed from *Hiawatha*, according to Fannie H. Eckstorm (153), and the name in this form appears again as the name of a town in Monona County, Iowa. Since

the Iowa town was laid out in 1857, it seems to be a safe presumption that this name, too, came from *Hiawatha*. The name of *Onaway* Lake in Rockingham County, New Hampshire, appears to be another variation of this name.

Manito, the name given to any spirit, often prefixed by *Gitche* 'great' or *Matchi* 'evil,' occurs several times in *Hiawatha*, and *Manito* appears as a placename in Illinois and Washington. In the French orthography, *Manitou*, and in combinations such as *Manitowish*, *Manitowoc*, and *Manitoba*, it appears in many more places, sometimes inappropriately, and obviously inspired by the many printed sources in which it occurs.

Another group of spirits, the *Wendigoes*, or giants, also called cannibals, in *Hiawatha*, may have given rise to the names of *Wendigo* Lakes and a *Windigo* Mine in Ontario. A dozen places named *Windigo* in the Great Lakes region, including a site on Isle Royale in Lake Superior, may owe their names to *Windigo* mythology.

Shifting to the animal world, we find the names of many creatures from the *Hiawatha* story adding interest to the map. Among these are *Ahmeek*, the beaver, in Michigan; *Bena*, the pheasant, in Minnesota and Virginia; *Dahinda*, the bullfrog, in Illinois and Saskatchewan; *Keego*, a slender fish, in Keego Harbor, Michigan, and Keego Lake, Wisconsin; *Kenabeek*, the serpent, in Ontario and Quebec; *Kenozha*, the pike, the name of lakes in Massachusetts and New York; *Mishe-Mokwa*, the great bear, in Wisconsin; *Nahma*, the sturgeon, in Michigan; *Omeme*, the pigeon, in North Dakota and Ontario; *Opechee*, the robin, on an island and stream in Maine, a lake in New Hampshire, and a peak in Virginia; *Owaissa*, the bluebird, on a town in Ontario; *Wabasso*, the white rabbit, on lakes in Alberta and communities in Florida, Minnesota, and Wisconsin; *Wawa*, the wild goose, in Pennsylvania and Ontario; and perhaps *Wawonaissa*, the whippoorwill, in Wawonesa, Manitoba.

Of plant names, apparently only two, besides *Mondamin*, are of probable *Hiawatha* origin. *Menahga*, Minnesota, may be from *Meenahga*, the blueberry in *Hiawatha*, although it has an extra *e*. Longfellow's spelling, however, was once used for a place in New York. Lake Apukwa, in Vilas County, Wisconsin, bears the name of the "bulrushes" or reeds.³ Longfellow mentions wild rice as *Mahnomonee*, a form closely approximated by *Mahnomen*, the name of a town on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, also the seat of Mahnomen County. There is no evidence, however, despite Upham's implication (321), that the name is from *Hiawatha* (See also Peterson).

Of heavenly bodies, it is likely that *Ishkoodah*, the comet, "Like the star with fiery tresses" (38), as it is described in *Hiawatha*, is the source of the name of *Ishkooda*, a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama, although W. A. Read does not list it at all.⁶

Among inanimate objects and natural features named in *Hiawatha* is *Muskoday*, the meadow. Of its several variants on the map it is likely that only two are borrowings from the poem: *Muscoda*, Alabama, and *Muskoda*, Minnesota. *Muscoda*, Wisconsin, was named prior to the publication of *Hiawatha*.⁷

Wawbeek, a rock, is mentioned three times in the poem as the only object feared by *Hiawatha*'s father, *Mudjekeewis*: "Nothing but the black rock yonder/ Nothing but the fatal *Wawbeek*" (40). This name in the same spelling is found only in Alabama, but in the form *Waubeeek*, it occurs in Wisconsin and Iowa. Since *Waubeeek* in Linn County, Iowa, was named in 1858, its origin is probably from *Hiawatha*. *Wabeek Lake*, in Oakland County, Michigan, is another variant.

Pukwana, a village in Brule County, South Dakota, is apparently the only place named for the smoke signals in *Hiawatha*: "All the tribes beheld the signal,/ Saw the distant smoke ascending,/ The *Pukwana* of the Peace-Pipe" (8).⁸

Ponemah is the name of villages in Illinois, Manitoba, Minnesota, and New Hampshire, and of a lake in Michigan. The Minnesota village, in Beltrami County, is a *Chippewa* (Ojibwa) settlement on the Red Lake reservation, but its origin is attributed by Upham to the *Hiawatha* story (39). The name is taken from the Ojibwa term used five times by Longfellow to denote the home of departed souls.⁹ Upon the death of *Minnehaha*, *Hiawatha* pledges:

"Soon my task will be completed,
Soon your footsteps I shall follow
To the Islands of the Blessed,
To the Kingdom of *Ponemah*,
To the Land of the Hereafter." (207)

Some other Indian names which are equivalents or variations of those in *Hiawatha* are not included here because their orthography or chronology seems to indicate a different origin from Longfellow's poem.¹⁰ However, we can conclude from this sampling that many Indian names were not given by or obtained directly from the native Americans,

but reached us by way of white interpreters. Thus, they are not so much a measure of direct aboriginal influence on toponymy as a revealing indicator of the pervasive influence of popular literature. But however they have reached us, these names are the echoes of the red men; they belong to our primeval heritage.

In closing, I wish to dedicate the foregoing paper as a grateful tribute to Professor Kelsie Harder. Since I first joined the American Name Society more than thirty years ago, with no laurels to my credit, he has always been a source of friendly encouragement.

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Notes

1. This is a revision of a paper delivered April 28, 1990, at a meeting of North Central Name Society, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.
2. Page numbers following quotations from *Hiawatha* refer to Longfellow.
3. "Waubeno, a kind of sorcerer"; "... many were grossly deceived by their own credulity and by the skill of the Indian Waubeno" (Cass 5, 31).
4. Also rendered as *Wapin*, *Wau-bun*, *Waupun*, *Waban*, etc., this name has a variety of meanings (especially in compound words), including "the dawn," "the east," "light," "white," etc.
5. In Baraga's *Otchipwe Language* (1: 208): *apkweshkwai* 'reed for mats.' Cf. Lake Puckaway in Green Lake County, Wisconsin, which "has its name from the long flags or rushes which are found in its waters in great abundance, and of which the squaws manufacture the coarse matting used in covering their wigwams" (Kinzie 65).
6. Read also omitted *Muscoda* and *Wawbeek* (cited below among inanimate objects), and *Nokomis*.
7. Other possible variants are Mascoutah, Illinois; Muscatine, Iowa; Muscotah, Kansas. See "Naming Wisconsin Valley Towns," 238-41.
8. "Smoke; there is smoke, pakwene, pashkine" (Baraga 1: 235). When Frank Kimball, in charge of building the Milwaukee line to Chamberlain on the Missouri River, saw the smoke hanging in the early morning above the construction shanties, he was reminded of the description in *Hiawatha* of the smoke from the peace pipe of the great spirit, and he chose Longfellow's name of the smoke for the siding which grew into the village of Pukwana (*Brule County History* 19).
9. Cf. Ojibwa *Pon-ne-mah* 'hereafter' and Ottawa *Paw-ne-maw* 'by and by' (James 396, 405). See also Chippewa *Ponemai* 'by and by' in John Long's Journal (Thwaites 2: 223ff).
10. E.g., *Chetowaik*, the plover (Chetek, Wisconsin); *Kenabeeks*, the serpents (Kanabec, Minnesota); *Wah-wah-taysee*, the firefly (Wauwatosa, Wisconsin).

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