The Origin and Meaning of 'Missouri'

Donald M. Lance
University of Missouri-Coluumbia

The name *Missouri* derives from *8emessourit*, an Algonquian term that refers to "people with canoes (made from logs)," and the popular mistranslation "muddy water" derives from *Pekitanoui*, an Algonquian name for the river. These terms were first used in 1673 by Marquette in his journal and on his map of the Mississippi River and it tributaries. Within a generation, French explorers and cartographers, using a variety of spellings and grammatical forms, had simplified the name to *Missouri* and applied it to the river as well as to the people, completely abandoning *Pekitanoui*. Those who lived on its banks—the Otos and Missouris—had other (Siouan) terms for the river. The word *Missouri* has become a popular American toponym and now is used in over 300 names in the USGS database.

Is it the Big Muddy or the River of the Big Canoes? And what was the name of the Native American group who lived and hunted along the banks of the Missouri and plied its muddy waters with canoes made from logs? One might keep in mind that pre-Colonial Native Americans and European explorers had different traditions regarding the nature and functions of toponymic appellations (Gordon 1984; Deur 1996; McArthur 1996). Native names were generally phrases, which Europeans wrote as single words but translated as phrases. Many of the native toponyms with which we are most familiar served as "locators" or points of geographic reference (McArthur 1996: 328) and were subject to change over time. In 1822-24, the Duke of Württemberg observed in his travel journal that the "creole hunters" tended to use the native placenames but that Anglo-Americans were "too selfish to retain them" and "distort[ed] the names of all places" (Württemberg 1835: 273-74). After Europeans began using the names that they saw on maps and in journals, the names often lost all direct connection to the individuals and tribes who had bestowed them. These toponyms in effect became French or English words, losing their status as native words in their original languages, as spellings were altered and suffixes were added.

In a study of Native American vocabulary in English, Cutler (1994: 62) reports that two-thirds of the datable native words borrowed during the eighteenth century were of Algonquian origin. As early explorers and hunters, particularly the French, moved inland in North America, because their guides often were from an Algonquian tribe, the names they recorded for places and people were from dialects within the Algonquian family of languages. Later on, as American settlers moved into the Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, and Louisiana Territories, they kept the toponyms that the French had already established through oral tradition or by placing them on maps, just as Spanish names were retained in the American Southwest.

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One of the difficulties that researchers face in recovering the "original" form of a name like *Missouri* is the variety of spellings in written records such and maps, explorers' journals, and derivative publications (see Hartley 1980; Peters 1984). Some of these variant spellings may be attributed to scribal error or to inaccurate renderings of fuzzy or smudged entries in early documents, if not to variant dialectal forms provided to explorers by native guides. Yet another source of variation is the fact that a cartographer or journal-writer may consciously or subconsciously have added French suffixes such as *-ite* or *-s* when referring to groups of people, thereby converting an ostensibly Native American word into a French word.

The earliest written record from which the word *Missouri* derives is a map drawn during the Marquette-Jolliet expedition of 1673. When the French explorers asked "Who lives over there?" their Illinois-speaking guides said the equivalent of "people with canoes." When asked the identity of a large river flowing into the Mississippi from the west, the guides replied with a term that meant something like "muddy water" (Shea 1852; Harrington 1951; Vogel 1960). Marquette's map is reprinted in Shea (1852: Appendix) and Tucker (1942: Plate V). Figure 1 shows a portion of Marquette's map (from Shea) with references to four Indian villages from whose names we now have the words *Des Moines*, *Peoria*, *Missouri*, and *Osage*.

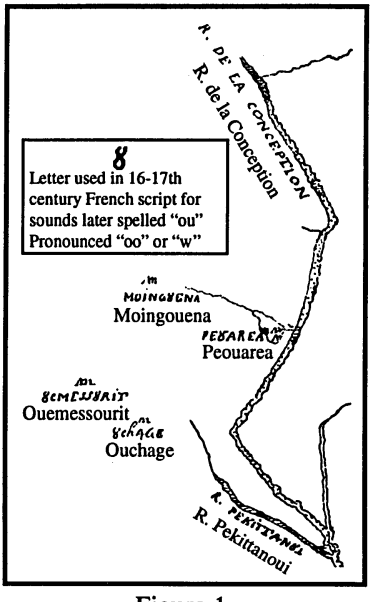

Figure 1.
Location of the Missouri Village and the Missouri River on Marquette's 1673 Map

The rivers flowing into the Mississippi River (called the Conception) are the Wisconsin, Wapsipinicon, Des Moines, Illinois, and Missouri (i.e., Pekittanoui).

The unfamiliar symbol (for convenience, represented here as *8*) in *8emessourit* and *Pekittan8i* in Figure 1 was introduced in 1572 by Pierre de La Ramée, also known as Pierre Ramus, as he proposed ways of reforming French spelling. Within a generation, however, printers no longer used most of the reforms that La Ramée and others had proposed (Rickard 1968: 46-47); however, as we see in Figure 1, some cartographers continued to use this symbol to represent the vowel sound in 'boot' (or "w" when before a vowel) over a century later.

Figure 2 displays four lines of a poem by Jean-Antoine de Baïf published in 1572 using La Ramée's orthography; the "ou" symbol is used in lines 1 and 4. When the cartographer Thévenot published a map in 1681, he used this symbol in the first syllable of *8missouri* but not in the third; he also used *-e-* rather than *-i-* in the second syllable and had no final-*t*. (Vogel, p. 218; Harrington, p. 15). Another explorer, Henri Tonty, an Italian who accompanied La Salle on his exploration of the Mississippi in 1682 (Meyer 1970: 31), did not use the *8-* in *Emissourita* (and added the Italian equivalent of French *-ite*) in a 1684 publication (Harrington, p. 15), and a map, reportedly based on Tonty's information, published by Franquelin a century later in Paris, called the river *La Grande Riviere des Emissourites* (Temple 1975: Plate LIX). For other words with La Ramée's symbol *8*, see Vogel, p. 22

During the last quarter of the 17th century, a form similar to *Missouri* appeared at least ten times in French documents, as shown in Figure 3 (Harrington 1951: 14-16; Vogel 1960: 214-16).

AVS POETES FRANSOES.

Vous, qui, les vers vieuresus n'abandonant,
De doktez eſpris lez ureus anfantemans
Au Frans' aportes : vous vivans qui fleurises:
Toe, pour le plus viel (Peletier) l'oneur du Mans.

Aus Poetes Francoes

O vous, qui, les vers vieuresus n'abandonant,
De doktez espris lez ureus anfantemans
Au Frans' aportes : vous vivans qui fleurises:
Toe, pour le plus viel (Peletier) l'oneur du Mans,

O, you, who, the old-established verses not abandoning,
Of learned minds the fortunate creations
To France brought : you living who flourish:
You, for the oldest (Peletier) the honor of [Le] Mans,

Figure 2.
A Sixteenth-Century French Text
(adapted from Rickard 1968: 47)

The first to use the word to refer to the river was La Salle in 1682 (Shoemaker 1943: 1-2). Wood (1984: 30-34) points out that for several generations explorers used maps, with considerable variation and frequent inaccuracy, that were based either on Marquette's map or on one that Jolliet reconstructed after having lost his original field maps in the Lachine Rapids near Montreal on his return home in 1674.

1673	--- Marquette-Joliet	**8emess8rit**
1681	--- Thévenot	**8missouri**
1684	--- La Salle/Tonty	**Emissourita**
1684	--- Tonty	**Missourita**
1687	--- Tonty	**Missouris**
1688	--- Franquelin	**Missourits**
1693	--- St. Cosme	**Missouris**
1697	--- Hennepin	**Massorites**
		Messorite, Messorites

Figure 3.
Early Instances of *Missouri*
(Harrington 1951 and Vogel 1960)

The current spelling of the word *Missouri* has prevailed since early in the eighteenth century, when it generally was used as the name for the people and for the river associated with them, following the tendency of early cartographers to name rivers for the native groups who lived along their banks. These variant spellings demonstrate the danger of assuming that a particular early spelling is "the right one" simply because it has been used in print.

If *Missouri* means "people with canoes," why do many think it means "Muddy Water?" In his study of Missouri place names, Ramsay (1973: 7) notes that "it is almost an article of faith with many Missourians that the name of their river means 'Big Muddy'." The name used by Marquette's Illinois guides was *Pekitanoui*, meaning "muddy water," and when the name of the people was transferred to the river, the word *Missouri* in fact referred to a stream of muddy water, but its original meaning was still "people with canoes." (Marquette used only one *-t-* in the name of the river in his journal, the spelling generally used by historians.) Vogel (1960: 213-14) points out that other Algonquian groups used a term with the same root to refer to muddy streams: *Pecatonica*, the Sauk name of a small stream in northern Illinois; *Pikitin*, the Pottawatomi name for the Missouri; *Píkitan*, the Fox name for the Missouri.

Native Americans in the Siouan language family also used names for the Missouri that described the appearance of the water. Vogel (1960: 216) cites several instances: Oto, *ne-su-ja* "smoky water;" Kansas, *ne-sho-ja* "muddy water"; Santee-Sioux, *Mí-ní-so-se* (minnyshoshay) "turbid water" and *Mi-ni-so-ta* "whitish water." The Oglala Sioux in South

Dakota call the river *Minne Shoza*, "muddy water" (McGillicuddy 1912). In an interview with the present author in 1992, Truman Washington Dailey (1898-1996), an elder of the Otoe-Missouria tribe in Oklahoma, said that the Oto name for the Missouri River is *Nisoje* (nee-so-jeh, with even syllable stress), literally "smoking water," from *nyi* "water" and *soje* "smoke," a figurative reference to the fog that rises like smoke from the river in the early morning. Though the Oto name does not refer literally to dirt or mud, Mr. Dailey said that the term *nisoje* might be used to refer figuratively to the appearance of dirt rolling along in the flow of water, but its primary reference is to rising smoke.

Harrington (1951: 19-21) credits the Algonquianist William Wallace Tooker with clarifying the meaning of the term *Missouri* in a response to an inquiry in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on December 18, 1892. According to Tooker, for "canoe," the Narraganset used the word *Me-shue-e*; the Miamis, who lived around Lake Michigan, used the term *Missola*; and the Illinois used *Wicwes-Missouri* for birchbark canoes and *We-Mis-su-re* or *We-Mes-su-re* for "a wooden canoe or canoe fashioned from a log" (20). The name *Missoula* (Montana), on the Clark Fork of the Bitterroot River west of the Continental Divide, though often assumed to be related to *Missouri*, is apparently of Salish origin and refers to "sparkling" or "chilling" waters (Cheney 1983: 178-79).

Some scholars, including Ramsay (1973: 40), have assumed that the *Miss-* in *Missouri* is the same root as *Missi-* in *Mississippi* and means "big." Vogel (1960: 217-19), however, cites ample evidence indicating that "there can be no debate" that the name refers to canoes and that it does not contain the *missi-* element. After reviewing numerous documents, Vogel (1960: 221) leaves no doubt that the Illinois term *pekittanoui* referred to muddy or turbid water and that *ouemessourit* referred simply to 'canoe' rather than to the appearance of river water or to big or wooden canoes.

Interestingly, there is also a Siouan tradition of naming the Missouri for canoes. Harrington (1951: 3) points out that the Hidatsa (northern Siouans) called the river the *Awathi*, a name that means "canoe river." The Crow (also northern Siouans) used the term *A-ise*, meaning "big river," for the waterway beginning in Montana and flowing to the Gulf of Mexico, with a tributary (the Mississippi) flowing into it from Minnesota in the north (Harrington 1951: 4).

If our word for the Missouri Indians and their river is from an Illinois dialect in the Algonquian language family, what did the Missouris call themselves? According to Truman Dailey (1988), his grandmother told him a number of stories that she had heard from her own grandmother, who was born while the Missouris still lived near the confluence of the Grand and Missouri Rivers in north-central Missouri. In 1798, when the Missouris were under attack by Sac and Fox warriors, a group of Missouris escaped by swimming around the mouth of the Grand River.[1]

Many of them drowned, but a group of about forty survived and were taken in by the Otos, who lived farther north, where the Platte flows into the Missouri, a few miles downriver from the bluffs where three Oto and three Missouri chiefs met with Lewis and Clark on August 2-3, 1804 (Lewis and Clark 1893, I: 64-65). After the Otoes had taken in the survivors who had escaped from the Sac and Fox attack, they gave the Missouris the name *Niutachi* (nyu-tah-chee), meaning "those who died in the water," a commemorative reference to those who did not survive. Vogel (1960: 215), citing an 1823 source, reports that the Missouris used this name for themselves but that it means "those who build a town at the entrance of a river." In a footnote in his 1893 edition of Lewis and Clark's journals, Coues has similar information (Lewis and Clark 1893, I: 22). Ramsay (1973: 40) gives a meaning similar to the one cited by Vogel. Harrington (1951: 17) mentions this name but does not give a meaning. Dailey indicated that the meaning of *Niutachi* is very clear. We know the Oto name given to the Missouris in 1798, but we have no way of recovering what they called themselves - i.e., other than the name that they adopted from the French.

The official name of the Oto and Missouri group in Oklahoma is *Otoe-Missouria*, not the standard spellings of these two words. When asked in 1992 how the *-a* was added to *Missouri* in the name of the tribe, Mr. Dailey responded that when he was on the tribal council in the 1950s he and "some other Missouri boys" proposed that since the group consists of a mix of two historic tribes they should alter the name to reflect that fact. He said the reason for using this spelling was that his father had always said "mi-zoo-ri-ay" in reference to the tribe. Dailey also said "Ioway;" his maternal grandmother was an Iowa. Thus, they turned to English spelling (though not to rules taught in school) to represent this suffix, but what is the source of the suffix? Neither Hodge (1907, I: 912) nor other sources cited here list spellings that would suggest this "-ay" pronunciation of the name for the Missouris, but other entries in Hodge list alternate spellings of tribal names that would. In a historical study of French morphology and pronunciation, Nyrop (1899, I: 142-46) points out that in the 1500s and 1600s words with the suffix *-ois, -ais* (indicating nationality) were pronounced "way" or "ay." Hodge's list of North American Indians contains numerous names with suffixes that suggest this pronunciation:

-a, -ais, -ay, -ays, -é, -és, -eis, -ez, -ois:

Aiowais, Ayovois, Ioways, Iowas
Cansa, Cansés, Cansez, Kansé, Kanseis
Cheyenne, Chaways
Chipaway, Ojibway
Conestoga, Antastoqué, Antanstoquais, Gansadtogués
Delaware, Delaways
Eskimo, Excomminquois
Iroquois, Hiroquais

Otoues, Otouez
Tamaroa, Tamarais, Tamarois

One might argue, then, that, rather than the tribal council in Oklahoma adding the *-a*, others deleted it, and that "Ioway" is the "correct" pronunciation of *Iowa*. Thus, both names that the Missouris used to refer to themselves were provided by groups who spoke another language—*Niutachi* by the Otos, whose language was closely related to theirs, and *Missouri-ay* by the French, who had added a French suffix to remnants of a phrase used by Marquette's Illinois guides in describing the Missouris' mode of water transport.

Though the translations of *Missouri* were correct in the earliest accounts, mistranslations have been repeated for almost 300 years in spite of periodic attempts by historians to correct the errors, including the Algonquianist William Tooker in 1892 (Harrington 1951: 19); Missouri historians Switzler (1897, citing Tooker) and Shoemaker (1943: 1-3); and Vogel (1960). Neither *Pekitanou* nor *Niutachi* has survived. Another interesting question, the pronunciation of *Missouri*, has attracted the attention of scholars (e.g., Read 1933; Pace 1960; Lance 1985)—but that story and must be saved for another venue.

In addition to being the name of the *USS Missouri* on whose decks the Japanese surrendered to the United States on September 2, 1945, the word *Missouri* appears frequently in story and song and has become a popular American placename, as well as an occasional personal name. In 1714, when a Missouri woman bore the son of Etienne Véniard de Bourgmont, a French adventurer, he named the baby Petit Missouri (Foley 1989: 8). The name was also frequently used as a female given name in the nineteenth century, as in the case of the present author's maternal great aunts Missouri, Tennessee, and Kansas Miller, all born in Arkansas. The files of the United States Geological Survey (1998) contain over 300 geographic and cultural sites in 32 states that use the word *Missouri* in their names: 73 in Missouri, 45 in Montana, 29 in Colorado, 15 in California, and 14 in Arkansas and Wyoming. It has been a popular name for waterways and associated references in over twenty states and for mines in eight states, as we see below:

Waterways

Missouri River

From the confluence of the Jefferson, Madison, and Gallatin Rivers in Montana to the Mississippi River near St. Louis, Missouri

Missouri Creek

Alaska California Colorado Iowa Idaho Illinois Minnesota Missouri Nevada Oregon Utah Wisconsin West Virginia

Little Missouri River
Arkansas
Wyoming - Montana - South Dakota - North Dakota

Little Missouri Creek
Illinois Missouri Wisconsin

Missouri Gulch
Colorado Idaho Montana Oregon

Other Names Related to Waterways

bar	bend	channel	dam
falls	flat	island	lake
levee	valley		

Missouri Mines
California Colorado Idaho Missouri Montana New Mexico Nevada Wyoming

Notes

1. Harrington (1951: 17) states that the attack "occurred perhaps about 1774." In their journal entry for June 13, 1804, after they had passed by two creeks on the north side of the Missouri five miles below the mouth of the Grand, Lewis and Clark (1893, I: 22-24) observed:

> Between these two creeks is the prairie, in which once stood the ancient village of the Missouris. Of this village there remains no vestige, nor is there anything to recall this great and numerous nation, except a feeble remnant of about 30 families. They were driven from their original seats by the invasions of the Sauks and other Indians from the Mississippi, who destroyed at this village 200 of them in one contest... A few retired with the Osage, and the remainder found an asylum on the Platte river, among the Ottoes, who themselves are declining. (22-23)

Hodge (1907, I: 911), providing more detail, gives the date as "about 1798." Mr. Dailey perhaps got his date from historians rather than from his grandmother, but the date easily fits into the family chronology as well. Hodge states that about eighty Missouris joined the Otos and that others joined the Osage and Iowa tribes.

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