

On the Birthday and Etymology of the Placename Missouri

Michael McCafferty
Indiana University

Only in the last twenty-five years have linguists taken a serious look at the Miami-Illinois language, and only in the last twelve years has the nature of the language come into excellent focus with the work of David J. Costa. This growth in understanding, enhanced by the Miami's own language revitalization program, naturally spills over into areas such as the Midwestern onomasticon, which, because of the caprice of history, is strewn with Miami-Illinois names. These include such notables as Illinois, Chicago, Wabash, Kankakee, and the name of the big river itself, Mississippi. The author of the present article, an Algonquian linguist, has completed a comprehensive historical and linguistic study of American Indian placenames in Indiana and is currently working on a similar study of those in Illinois. This paper is a fresh look at "Missouri," that beloved old Miami-Illinois language placename for the state just across the big river. It is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Donald M. Lance, the Missouri placename specialist, for whom I served as an Algonquian language consultant starting in the year 2000.

The great Iroquoian linguist Floyd Lounsbury laid out very important guidelines for analyzing American Indian placenames.¹ One of several things that the researcher must do is determine when a placename was first written down, when it became a historical fact. In this regard, the placename "Missouri" is a very special case indeed. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of this term requires understanding the historical setting in which it first turned up.

In 1984, waterline surveyors working north of Wayland in Clark County, northeastern Missouri, stumbled upon the remains of a large contact-era Indian village.² Located near the Des Moines River not far from Keokuk, Iowa, this site has since been identified by archaeologists as the historically famous village of the Peoria, an Illinois-speaking

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group, visited by the French explorers Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet on 25-26 June 1673 during their epic voyage through the middle Mississippi Valley.

A review of American history books and articles from the 1900s indicates that throughout most of that century there was uncertainty as to what western tributary of the Mississippi the Peoria were actually living on when Marquette and Jolliet found them. The Iowa River appears to have been the preferred candidate for the location of this event.³ However, not only do the native and French artifacts recovered from the Clark County site, including European trade beads and a Jesuit ring, support the notion that the Marquette-Jolliet Peoria village was located on the Des Moines River, the historical cartographic evidence demonstrates unequivocally, and in more than one way, that this locale was on the Des Moines.

The early French after the time of Marquette certainly never forgot which river it was on. They even dubbed the stream "la rivière de Moingoana," "de Moingoana" being the origin of the modern placename "Des Moines". In talking with the Peoria, Marquette had learned of another tribe of Illinois speakers, living directly upstream from the Peoria, whose name appears on his Mississippi voyage map in the form <MOING8ENA>⁴ (The letter 8 stands here for the sound *w*). Indeed, the cartographic history of this placename shows mapmakers were familiar with the Jolliet-inspired maps of the Mississippi voyage rather than with Marquette's journal. Otherwise, they would likely have termed the stream **la rivière des Pe8areas* (**River of the Peoria*). The cartographic history of this stream also evidences an unbroken chain of development leading from the original French hydronym to the English one. "Des Moines," which translates literally from the French to "of the monks," is a folk-etymology. There were no monks. Chronologically, the river appears in history as *Riviere de Moingoana*, *Le Moingona*, *R. Moingana*, *Riviere du Moins*, *River des Moines*, *River de Moin*, *Le Moin River*, *riv. des Moins*.⁵ As

suggested by the evidence above, the person responsible for twisting the original placename into its modern shape seems to have been the bilingual British lieutenant Thomas Hutchins, in the mid-eighteenth century, who wrote *Riviere du Moins*. The Peoria, who gave Marquette the name for their Illinois-speaking neighbors, must have had an immense sense of humor as <MOING8ENA>, which represents Miami-Illinois *mooyiinkweena*, means “shit face,” from *mooy-* ‘shit, excrement’, *-iinkwee-* ‘face’, and *-na*, the independent animate indefinite actor suffix.⁶ In truth, this use of *mooyiinkweena* by the Peoria can be none other than a nickname of sorts—a clever, crass joke. One must therefore give them credit for creating one of the most successful and far-reaching practical jokes of all time. Later French cartographers and explorers simply used this particular ethnonym rather than the Peoria’s name to designate the Des Moines River since both tribe names appear on the earliest French maps depicting this stream.

It seems odd from today’s vantage point that the Des Moines River was not recognized as the Peoria’s river at least by the 1940s. By that time, through the study of Marquette’s map of his Mississippi journey, scholars had come to notice Marquette’s technically superior cartographic skills.⁷ Therefore, it is not clear why they did not recognize the Des Moines River as the stream along which the Peoria were living when Marquette visited them. The Des Moines River would have jumped off the paper into their laps if they had simply placed his map alongside later historical or even modern charts.⁸

The Marquette map itself has an additional and relevant point to make concerning the Peoria’s location on the Des Moines River. While the missionary-explorer embellished the entire unfettered course of the Mississippi on his chart with tiny dots, he intentionally underscored the location of rapids in the great river with miniscule *horizontal lines*, notations that have until now remained undetected. In fact, the lines on his map indicating the presence of rapids near the

mouth of the river on which the Peoria resided at the time of his visit represent none other than the historically famous Des Moines Rapids. These rapids were located in the Mississippi near the confluence of the two rivers but now lie beneath the waters gathered by the Keokuk dam.

Overall, the Marquette map is an exquisite piece of early cartography in that it is not only technically excellent, but also it states just the *bare facts*. It shows only what the explorer saw or already knew. It does not portray any superfluous, imaginary tributaries falling into the rivers that Marquette passed, although it does show the western tributaries of Lake Michigan which he did in fact see on his return to Green Bay from the Mississippi. In a nutshell, the fabled Mississippi voyage of French discovery by canoe started at St. Ignace at Michilimakinac, proceeded to Green Bay, then ascended the Fox River to the Miami-Mascouten town near present-day Berlin, Wisconsin. There the Frenchmen enjoined the services of two Miami men, since Marquette spoke Miami-Illinois but not Mascouten. These two Miami then led Marquette, Jolliet, and their assistants to the Fox River-Wisconsin River portage, at which point the French party was left to its own devices. From there the explorers descended the Wisconsin to the Mississippi, and the Mississippi to the Arkansas. They then ascended the Mississippi to the Illinois and followed the Illinois River to Chicago. Coming out of the Chicago River at Lake Michigan they paddled up the west coast of the Great Lake to the Door Peninsula, which they portaged to reach Green Bay and the Jesuit mission there. Twenty-seven years after Marquette's voyage on the Mississippi, Pénicault went up the big river with the Le Moyne brothers—Pierre and Jean-Baptiste, Sieur d'Iberville and Sieur de Bienville respectively—and discussed the rapids located at the confluence of the Mississippi and the Des Moines River. The French traveler noted that they had caused his party "much fatigue," that they were interspersed with waterfalls, and that they were fourteen leagues in length

overall (about 35 miles). In describing the Mississippi as his party ascended it from the the mouth of the Des Moines River, Pénicault counted seven leagues of rapids (about 17.5 miles) interspersed with waterfalls, followed by seven leagues of calm water, and then seven additional leagues of rapids. Of course, Pénicault also called the tributary entering the Mississippi at the rapids *Rivière de Moingona*.⁹

In light of the above, it is now possible to gain insight into the thoughts and actions of the seven French explorers of the Marquette-Jolliet expedition team just after the summer solstice of 1673, during this the first descent by Europeans of the middle Mississippi valley. Traveling down the Mississippi and having maneuvered their two canoes through these long, grueling rapids, the men suddenly noticed on their right the mouth of the Des Moines River. The sighting of this stream was a significant moment in their already protracted journey, for this was the first major western tributary of the Mississippi they had encountered since entering the Mississippi from the Wisconsin. Thus, it was a combination of fatigue from negotiating the demanding Des Moines Rapids and sheer curiosity in the face of this newfound tributary of the Mississippi that induced the travelers to disembark at this point.

Thanks to Marquette's narration of the voyage, historians have long been aware that upon reaching the western bank of the Mississippi the explorers noticed human footprints on the water's edge and a path leading northwest up the Des Moines. This particular discovery was an equally meaningful event. After separating from their two Miami guides at the Fox River-Wisconsin River portage, the seven Frenchmen had traveled more than *seven hundred miles* by canoe without seeing the first sign of other humans, although they were fully aware that Illinois-speaking bands were *somewhere* in the general vicinity of the central Mississippi valley. So, while ignorant of the identity of whomever they might encounter if they followed those footprints, the intrepid

Marquette, who, as noted, spoke Illinois, and his good friend Jolliet left the five others with the canoes at the confluence of the Mississippi and Des Moines rivers to await their return and set off by themselves on foot up the latter stream. Of course, the path they took on June 25, 1673, eventually led to the Peoria village mentioned above and right into the annals of history. Also, in less than thirty hours after their arrival, the name "Missouri" was inscribed in those same annals for the very first time.¹⁰

In the winter of 1673-1674, after he had returned from the Mississippi and was living at the St. François Xavier mission at the southern end of Green Bay, Marquette drew two identical maps of his Mississippi journey, one of which, reproduced for this article, has survived. On this map he indicates the names of various nations living in the general vicinity of the Peoria village. Since these tribe names are in the Illinois language and describe the Peoria's neighbors, Marquette no doubt got them at the Illinois-speaking Peoria village. One of the ethnonyms he wrote down that was new to the French was <8EMESS8RIT>. This spelling represents the earliest recorded form of the name of the Siouan-speaking tribe known later as the Missouri or the Missouri Indians, whose name in Illinois would become in time the state name "Missouri." In <8EMESS8RIT> the first 8 stands for the sound *w* and the second 8 for *-oo-*. Marquette's double-s is the way that French Jesuits among the Illinois typically wrote preaspirated *-hs-*. Marquette should have written *8EMESS8RITA since there actually was a final *-a* sound on this name. It shows up, for example, in the historical recordings <Emissourita> and <Missourita> done respectively by Henri de Tonty, the explorer René de La Salle's right-hand man, and by Pierre Charles de Liette, a younger relative of Tonty. Both could speak some Illinois.¹¹ But Marquette can be forgiven for failing to hear the final *-a* since final Illinois short *-a* in this particular context was naturally devoiced

(whispered), and he had only been studying the language for two years.

The actual shape of the Illinois language ethnonym <8EMESS8RIT> is optionally *weemeehsoorita* and *weemihsoorita*, meaning "one who boats," "one who has a boat." The Illinois Indians' name for the Missouri Indians indicates that the former were impressed by the latter's boats. Grammatically speaking, this Illinois term is a participle. Note, however, that in Illinois grammar "participle" does not correspond to English participles, in other words to verb forms ending in -ing or -ed. The term is used in Illinois syntax to describe a class of verbs that commonly show up in dependent clauses.¹² The participle is a grammatical form that was employed in this language for, among other things, both tribe and personal names. Among Indiana placenames we find Lake Wawasee, where Wawasee is a corruption of the participle *waawiyasita* 'one who is round'. This was the name of a historic Miami leader who lived in the vicinity of this lake. The plural form of the ethnonym *weemihsoorita*, though apparently unattested, would be *weemihsooriciki*, where *c* stands for the sound written *ch* in English "child."

The first <-E-> of Marquette's <8EMESS8RIT>, in contradistinction to the <-i-> in Tonty's and De Liette's spellings, represents dialectal variation; both sounds are expected. In Marquette's case, the original first syllable *i* of *mihsoori* 'canoe', when possessed, goes to *e*, as expected. Next, since it is now a vowel in a strong position, it lengthens. The sound is subsequently reanalyzed as a long vowel, because of this position, and when it takes a long vowel before it, as for example in the case of *-ee-* in *weemeehsoorita*, a verb of possession derived from a noun, it remains generalized as a long vowel. This kind of change only takes place within the context of morphological alternation. In other words, it never occurs word-internally, in which case it would not be subject to morphological alternation—and the predicted sound laws would occur without exception.¹³ The morphophonemic—or

elemental—breakdown of *weemeehsoorita* ~ *weemihsoorita* is |wi-mihs-oor-i-t-a| third-person possessive prefix-‘big’-‘watercraft’- inanimate noun suffix-third person animate intransitive participle marker-third person animate intransitive participle ending. In the Illinois language *mihsoori*, meaning literally “big-boat,” is the generic term for “canoe”.

The initial <8E-> of Marquette’s spelling represents *wee-*, the ablauted form of the third person possessive suffix *wi-*.¹⁴ The ablaut, or “initial change,” from *wi-* to *wee-* is triggered by the syntax of the term, in other words, because it is a participle. As mentioned above, in Illinois a participle is a form of a dependent verb, and dependent verbs are the kind of verbs that undergo initial-syllable ablaut.¹⁵ The <8E-> of Marquette’s term is not an ethnonymic prefix as some might assume. In Illinois, the ethnonymic prefix is *a-*, not *wi-*, and it is actually rarely attested since initial short *a-*, being in a weak syllable, drops in everyday speech. For example, Illinois phonemic *acipwia* ‘Ojibwa’ is commonly pronounced [cipwia].

The simplification in French of Marquette’s <8EMESS8RIT>, the spelling of the original Illinois-language name for the Missouri Indians, took less than two years to accomplish. In 1675, Jolliet had the name inscribed on a map drawn for him in Quebec that year by Jean-Baptiste-Louis Franquelin. There we see an already shortened <Mess8ni>, which is a miscopied *Mess8ri, where original *r* was misread as *n*.¹⁶ However, the shortening of *weemeehsoorita* is expected since French traders and soldiers in the middle Mississippi valley in the late seventeenth and throughout most of the eighteenth century were well aware of the Illinois word for “canoe,” *mihsoori*, and this three-syllable term was no doubt easier to say than the original five-syllable *weemeehsoorita*.

The modern spelling “Missouri,” the form that would become in time the name of the state, is itself quite old. Its first appearance seems to be on the map Franquelin and Jolliet designed in Quebec in 1678. Here we see the form <Miss8ri>,

where the letter 8 stands for standard French orthographic -ou-, giving us "Missouri".¹⁷

Notes

1. Floyd G. Lounsbury, *Iroquois placenames in the Champlain Valley*. Albany: University of the State of New York, State Education Department, 1960. Reprinted from the Report of the New York-Vermont Interstate Commerce Commission on the Lake Champlain Basin, 1960, Legislative Document 9:23-66.

2. See Larry Grantham, "The Illinois Village of the Marquette and Joliet Voyage of 1673," *The Missouri Archaeologist* 54 (1993): 1-20.

3. See L.G. Weld, "Joliet and Marquette in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 1 (1903): 16; Jean Delanglez, "The 'Récit des voyages et des découvertes du Père Jacques Marquette'," *Mid-America* 28, no. 3 & 4 (1946): 235; also Raphael N. Hamilton, *Marquette's Explorations: The Narratives Reexamined*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970, 179.

4. The original map by Father Jacques Marquette is in the Archives de la Société de Jésus Canada français, St-Jérôme, Quebec. *Recueil* 196. My thanks to archivist Isabelle Contant for permission to reproduce it here. A best copy of this map is in Sarah Jones Tucker, comp, *Indian Villages of the Illinois Country*. Illinois State Museum Scientific Papers 2(1). Pt. 1. (Springfield, 1942), plate V.

5. Jean-Baptiste Franquelin, [1684], 'Carte de l'Amerique Septent.^{le} entre 27 et 64 degrés de latitude & environ 250 & 340 de longitude ou est compris les pays de...// Par Jean Baptiste Louis Franquelin; dessinée et Écrite par F. de la Croix.' Bibliothèque historique centrale de la Marine (Château de Vincennes, Pavillon de la Reine) *Recueil* 66, no. 8-11. A copy of this map, dated 1687, is in W. P. Cumming, S.E. Hillier, D.B. Quinn and G. Williams, *The*

Exploration of North America 1630-1776 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 153; Guillaume Delisle, 1718, 'Carte de La Louisiane Et Du Cours Du Mississipi', in Tucker, comp., *Indian Villages of the Illinois Country*, pl. XV; Daniel Coxe, 1722, 'A Map of Carolana and the River Meschacebe', in Cumming, *The Exploration of North America*, 154; Thomas Hutchins, 'A New Map of the Western Part of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland and North Carolina...' in Tucker, comp., *Indian Villages*, pl. XXIX; Zebulon Montgomery Pike, April 1808-1810, 'A Sketch of the Missisipi from the Town of S^t. Louis to its source in the Upper Red Cedar Lake..., Drawn by Anthony Nau', *ibid.*, pl. XXXIIB; [William Clark], (1805), 'A Map of part of the Continent of North America between the 35th. and 51st. degree of North Latitude...', *ibid.*, pl. XXXIB; Anon., [1815-1816], [Sketch of Part of the Upper Mississippi at the Close of the War of 1812, *ibid.*, pl. XXXIX; René Paul and Auguste Chouteau, 1816, 'A Map Exhibiting the Terrestrial Limits of Several Nations & Tribes...', *ibid.*, plate XLI.

6. David J. Costa, "Miami-Illinois Tribe Names." *Proceedings of the Thirty-first Algonquian Conference*. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press: 2000), 45-46.

7. See, for example, Jean Delanglez, "The Marquette Autograph Map of the Mississippi River," *Mid-America* XXVII (1945), 30-53. For a more in-depth understanding of Marquette's cartographic abilities, see Lucien Campeau, "Les Cartes relatives à la découverte du Mississipi par le P. Jacques Marquette et Louis Jolliet," *Les Cahiers des Dix* 47 (1992), 43-53.

8. Compare Pike's and Hutchins' maps (see footnote 3). See also the anonymous map [Sketch of Part of the Upper Mississippi at the Close of the War of 1812] (Tucker, plate XXXIX).

9. Pierre Margry, ed. *Découvertes et établissements des Français dans l'ouest et dans le sud de l'Amérique septentrionale 1614-1754, Mémoires et documents inédits recueillis et publiés par Pierre Margry*, 6 vols. [reprint] (New York: AMS Press, 1974), 5:411-12.

10. For the discovery of the Peoria village on June 25, 1673, see Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 73 vols. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Co., 1896-1901), 59: 112-115. For the date and time of departure from the Peoria village, see *ibid.*, 59: 124-125, 136. For French knowledge before the voyage that the Peoria were living in the Mississippi valley, see *ibid.*, 58: 42-43. For the definitive analysis of the primary and secondary documents related to this trip see Lucien Campeau's enlightening "Regards critiques sur la *Narration* du P. Jacques Marquette, *Les Cahiers des Dix* 46 (1991): 21-60.

11. <Emissourita> is in *Relation of Henri de Tonty Concerning the Exploration of La Salle from 1678 to 1683* (Chicago, The Caxton Club, 1898), 65. De Liette's <Missourita> is in the "De Gannes Memoir." See Theodore Calvin Pease and Raymond C. Werner, eds., *The French Foundation 1680-1693*, in *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library*, Vol. 23, (French Series, Vol. 1, *The French Foundations: 1680-1693*), 389.

12. See David J. Costa, *The Miami-Illinois Language*, (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 283ff.

13. I would like to thank David Costa for his help in explaining this phenomenon.

14. Illinois long *ee* can be pronounced like the vowel in English "fail," "fell," and even the *a* in "fallow," but without the English off-glide in each case.

15. See Costa, *The Miami-Illinois Language*, 284, 393-441.

16. Tucker, comp, *Indian Villages of the Illinois Country*, plate IV. This map is incorrectly dated 1674.

17. 'Carte générale de la France Septentrionale contenant la découverte du pays des Illinois' (1678). Paris: Service français de l'Hydrographie et de la Marine, 4040B11. For a discussion of this map see Campeau, "Les Cartes relatives..." 75-80.

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