

Book Review

Native American Place Names in Mississippi. By KEITH A. BACA. Pp. xx + 143. University Press of Mississippi, 2007. \$50.00 (cloth), \$18.00 (paper). ISBN: 1-57806-955-6.

The past several years have seen a resurgence of interest in Native American placenames, beginning with William Bright's remarkably comprehensive *Native American Placenames of the United States* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2004). Joining Bright and several others whose books are currently in production is Keith Baca, whose *Native American Place Names in Mississippi* is a welcome addition to a long-neglected aspect of American placenaming, which for far too many years was dismissed as 'insignificant' and patronized as 'merely descriptive.'

Keith Baca is well qualified to take on the task of dealing with Mississippi's native names. While a graduate student at Louisiana State University he became familiar with William A. Read's classic *Louisiana Place-Names of Indian Origin*, first published in 1927. Baca spent much of his professional career as an archaeologist with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and it was while working with the maps produced by the USGS that he became aware of the sheer number of native names in the state. From these he has selected between 500 and 600 names to include here. These are overwhelmingly from Choctaw or Chickasaw, closely related Muskogean languages and the major indigenous people of Mississippi. Many names are based upon a few Choctaw words (usually with close cognates in Chickasaw). *Bogue* (< *bok*) 'stream,' *chitto* 'big,' *oka* 'water,' and *homa* 'red' provide the bases for such names as *Bogue Chitto* 'big creek,' *Okahatta* 'white water,' and *Tallahoma* 'red rock.' Baca omits discontinued names and names consisting of Indian words 'that have been well assimilated into American English' (p. xi), such as those with *persimmon* and *hickory* and — somewhat surprisingly — *bayou*. While this avoids unnecessary repetition, omission of the latter especially leads to a serious undercount of the number of native names; for Mississippi GNIS lists some 700 names with *bayou* (through Louisiana French < Choctaw *bayuk* 'stream').

The entries include the name, location of the community or natural feature, the current local pronunciation, and discussion of previously suggested etymologies and derivations (with references), followed by criticisms and Baca's own interpretations where earlier suggestions are shown to be false or are non-existent. There are, of course, a number of items which have become so distorted over the years that all Baca can do is summarize and critique the available materials. (There appear to be several dozen of these.) The 80-some references seem to be complete and up to date; Baca has made excellent use of these resources, especially Bright (2004) and Munro and Willmond's *Chickasaw: An Analytical Dictionary* (1994).

When Baca claims that this is 'largely a compilation of previous work' and that he has merely 'attempted to collect and evaluate all available previous translations of each name' (p. viii), he is being far too modest; in fact his creativity and original contributions are apparent on every page. His primary interest is to determine the actual (or at least most probable) etymology for each name and to this end he holds previous suggestions to the light of Choctaw and Chickasaw vocabularies, rejecting many proposals and in more than 100 instances where no previous etymologies have been offered or are obviously erroneous he has provided his own and in the process Baca exposes many myths, legends, and folk tales surrounding the names and replaces them with reliable scholarship.

A welcome addition to this book is the inclusion of current local pronunciations. Ascertaining and recording the usual local pronunciation is the most difficult aspect of place

name research, and Baca is to be commended for accepting the challenge. There are a number of times where he is forced to say ‘Local pronunciation unrecorded,’ but these are exceptional. However, although both Choctaw and Chickasaw alphabets and pronunciation guides are included, there is no explanation of the general transcription system used to record current pronunciation and this causes confusion at times. The pronunciation of *Pocahontas* is given as ‘po-kuh-HON-tus,’ where <o> seems to be doing double duty, serving to represent both [o] and [a]. And we don’t know if *Amite*, where one of two given pronunciations is ‘am-EET,’ is [amít], [æmít], or [emít] (probably the last, as it is in Louisiana). Nevertheless, the recorded pronunciations are informative and cast light on what would bewilder readers who relied on the spelling alone. We learn that *Tchoutacabouffa* is pronounced locally (using Baca’s phonetic rendering, where <uh> represents schwa and the stressed syllable is in caps), choo-tuh-kuh-BUFF-uh, *Sucarnoochee* is soo-kuh-NOTCH-ee, and *Ittobechi* is it-uh-BEE-chee.

Native American Place Names in Mississippi makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the influence of native names on the landscape. It is the most reliable guide to native American names in Mississippi currently available.

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