

## Returning to Missouri

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A clean analysis of a place name as important in geography and history as “Missouri” is concisely presented here in order to correct a mistake in an earlier work on the same name. While a brief correction of that mistake was published, this readily accessible article with the correct etymology of the name will benefit all who come in search of its origin and meaning.

KEYWORDS Missouri, Miami-Illinois language, Jacques Marquette, Missouri River, Algonquian, Missouri Indians

In June 2003, *Names* published a historical and ethno-linguistic article titled “On the Birthday and Etymology of the Placename Missouri.” That article stands on its own, except for one little word that appears twice on page 120. That word, “big,” was the translation offered for the “Miss-” of “Missouri.” A correct explanation of that one syllable and a clean morphological analysis of the name itself are provided below.

Although unbeknownst to this writer at the time, mistaking the “Miss-” in “Missouri” for Algonquian “big” had been done before, by the seminal Algonquian linguist Frank Siebert about thirty years earlier (Siebert, 1975: 318). However, soon after “On the Birthday and Etymology of the Placename Missouri” was published, David Costa pointed me to the fact Ives Goddard had reconstructed the Proto-Algonquian source term of what would one day be the name “Missouri” and published that analysis in his 1982 article *The Historical Phonology of Munsee* (pers. comm., November 14 2003).

The “Miss-” of “Missouri” is in truth the Miami-Illinois prenoun *mih̄s-*, meaning “log” (see < Missi une buche de (bois) > in Largillier, c. 1700: f. 296). Thus, the Miami-Illinois word for “dugout canoe,” *mih̄soori*, is literally “log-canoe,” not “big-canoe” as stated in the original article. The problem arose because in Miami-Illinois several Proto-Algonquian consonant clusters merged as *hs*, so that the prenoun meaning “wooden” ended up being pronounced in the same way as the prenoun meaning “big.” While it is not inconceivable that Miami-Illinois speakers might have “folk etymologized” *mih̄soori* to mean “big boat,” the term finds its true source in Proto-Algonquian *\*meh̄θo·ši*, meaning a watercraft made of wood (Goddard, 1982: 22).

Of course, the state of Missouri and the Missouri River did not get their names directly from the Miami-Illinois word for “dugout canoe.” The source of both the toponym and the hydronym was the Miami-Illinois name for a Siouan-speaking tribe known as the Missouri.

Jacques Marquette, Louis Jolliet, and their French explorer companions on the great Mississippi canoe voyage of 1673 were the first Europeans in history to lay eyes on the land now known as the state of Missouri. They paddled in two birch bark canoes along the entire length of the state's eastern border in the early summer of that year and passed the mouth of the Missouri River, whose Miami-Illinois name is *peekihtanwi*, which means "it flows with mud." Marquette was the first in history to record this name, which he wrote in the form < PEKITAN8I > on his holograph map of the Mississippi voyage. The missionary-explorer was also the first to record the name of the Missouri Indians who lived up that river.

Marquette and Jolliet did not meet the Missouri Indians on their Mississippi voyage. However, the Miami-Illinois-speaking Peoria tribe that the Frenchmen met near the mouth of the Des Moines River told them about the Missouri, and gave them the Miami-Illinois name for the tribe. Marquette's recording of this name, the first historical recording of it, also appears on his map in the spelling < 8EMESS8RIT >. This recording represents phonemic *weemeehsoorita*, which is grammatically a participle and means "he has a dugout canoe" or "one who has a dugout canoe." Note that Marquette's recording < -MESS- > evinces ablaut, so that *mihs-* becomes *meehs-*.

The name *weemeehsoorita* can be broken down into the following elements: *wee-mihs-oor-i-t-a*, where *wee-* is the third-person possessive prefix; *-mihs-* is "log"; *-oor-* is "canoe"; *-i-* is the animate intransitive verb suffix meaning "has"; *-t-* is the dependent animate intransitive third-person verb marker; and *-a* is the participle ending. The natural implication of this Miami-Illinois language ethnonym is that, to the Illinois Indians, the Missouri Indians were a distinctive tribe on account of their dugout canoes.

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## Notes on contributor

Michael McCafferty is an Algonquianist. One of his interests is Miami-Illinois language onomastics. He is the author of the historical and linguistic study *Native American Place-Names of Indiana*, and also writes on the early historic French-Algonquian interface in the Illinois.

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