

The Etymology and History of the Placename “Des Moines”

MICHAEL McCafferty

Indiana University, Bloomington, USA

The original form of the placename “Des Moines” was created by a seventeenth-century French mapmaker. It was given a new life — and its present form — by an early nineteenth-century French-speaking mapmaker. However, the name “Moines” comes from an American Indian tribe name that has undergone extensive and interesting changes since it was first recorded around the summer solstice in the year 1673 by the Jesuit missionary-explorer Jacques Marquette. The following article presents this placename’s history and explains its unusual meaning in the Miami-Illinois language.

KEYWORDS Des Moines River, Iowa history, Miami-Illinois language, American Indian placenames, Mississippi valley French, Jacques Marquette

The publication of the linguistic analysis of the placename “Des Moines” (Costa, 2000: 45–46; McCafferty, 2003: 112–13) has caused a certain stir, especially among Iowans, some of whom have wondered aloud in the Press and on the Internet about the analysis, and even contacted this author in disbelief, despair, or at least with a certain curiosity. The intent of the present article is to provide a fuller examination of the etymology and history of the placename “Des Moines,” and hopefully put the questions to rest.

Four days after the summer solstice of 1673, Louis Jolliet, a Quebec-born fur trader, Jacques Marquette, a French-born Jesuit missionary, and the latter’s friend and assistant, French-born Jacques Largillier, a former fur trader in the upper Great Lakes, along with four other native French speakers, became the first Europeans to see Iowa, as they paddled down the Mississippi along what would one day be the state’s entire eastern border. On Sunday, June 25, after their two birch bark canoes had passed the Keokuk rapids, which Marquette indicated with little horizontal lines on his map of the voyage (McCafferty, 2003: 114–15), the team of discovery noticed human footprints in the mud along the Mississippi at its confluence with the Des Moines River. Although they had been very excited on the previous Sunday when they became the first Europeans to see the upper Mississippi, the discovery of these footprints was an exciting one in itself, for the men had not seen any sign of Indians

since their Miami guides had left them at the portage between the upper Fox River of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin River on June 10. The footprints induced Marquette and Jolliet to head up the Des Moines River in search of the folks who had left those tracks behind in the mud (Thwaites, 1896–1901, 59: 105–15).

A few miles up the Des Moines, the priest and his companion came upon the Peoria, a division of the Illinois, who welcomed the two foreigners. Marquette and Jolliet spent the rest of that day, that night, and most of the next day into the mid-afternoon with the Peoria (Thwaites, 1896–1901, 58: 125). The Peoria spoke Miami-Illinois, an Algonquian language that in early historic times was spoken in the middle Mississippi watershed in what is now eastern Iowa, eastern Missouri, all of Illinois, all of Indiana, western Ohio, southern Michigan, and southern Wisconsin. Father Marquette had spent three years learning Miami-Illinois while living at the Jesuit mission near the western end of Lake Superior in preparation for establishing a mission among the Illinois. His teacher had been a Miami-Illinois-speaking boy living there among the Ottawa (Thwaites, 1896–1901, 54: 186–88). Thus, by the time he arrived among the Peoria in the opening days of the summer of 1673, Marquette, already a fluent speaker of the Algonquian languages known as Algonquin and Ottawa, and versed in Algonquian thought and cultural practices, could speak their sister language Miami-Illinois relatively well, well enough, as his journal of the Mississippi voyage suggests, to communicate easily with the Peoria on a variety of topics — including the names and locations of tribes west of the big river. It should also be noted that Marquette’s recordings of American Indian tribe names and placenames that on his map of the Mississippi and in his two journals are phonetically very good. He was not only very well educated, but he had a good ear.

Indeed, on Marquette’s map of the Mississippi are found several Miami-Illinois tribe names that made their first appearance in the historical record on those two days that he and Jolliet spent with the Peoria, names which only the Peoria could have given him. Among these is the name of another Illinois group that was living just up the Des Moines River from the Peoria, a name which Marquette wrote in his characteristic manner in upper-case block letters: MOING8ENA (Marquette, [1673]).¹ It is this term which is the origin of the word “Moines” in “Des Moines”. “Moines,” although technically a French word, is not at all French *in origin*. This fact was first recognized in 1841 (Nicollet, 1841: 22), pointed out again in 1898 (Keyes, 1898: 556–58), and was mentioned yet again many decades later both in a prominent book on American placenames (Stewart, 1970: 135) as well as in the synonymy of Illinois tribal names in the Smithsonian’s *Handbook of North American Indians* (Callender, in Sturtevant, 1978, 15: 680).

After Marquette, the name MOING8ENA was standardized by the Jesuits in the form *Mouinguena* (Thwaites, 1896–1901, 65: 101).² Like Marquette’s spelling, *Mouinguena* is phonetically very good, and in fact it is as good as one could produce at the time with a Western European spelling system, that is, before the invention of the International Phonetic Alphabet. However, within five years of Marquette’s recording this name, the Quebec mapmaker Jean-Baptiste Louis Franquelin began using it in his work. But he also miswrote it. It has been pointed out that Franquelin was lackadaisical in reproducing Indian names that came to him from his French explorer contemporaries such as René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle (McCafferty, 2008: 32). In the case of

Mouinguena, Franquelin first changed the name slightly into the form *Moueng8ena* in 1678, clearly originally a Jesuit spelling with the 8 symbol that here represented the sound *w*, and then he further distorted the original spelling, nearly beyond recognition, with his *Moingana* and *Moingoana* by 1684 (Franquelin, 1678; Franquelin, 1684a). The latter spelling was again muddled by Franquelin in 1697 into the form *Moingona*, which is how the tribe name is most frequently seen on later maps and in the literature both past and present (Franquelin, 1697).³

In the early 1680s, Franquelin was employed as mapmaker by La Salle, and, naturally, we find La Salle using the distorted spelling *Moingoana* in his own work (Margry, 1876, 2: 134). Importantly, by 1684, as evidenced on one of Franquelin's maps of that year, the tribe's name had clearly become associated with the Des Moines River, for Franquelin calls this heretofore unnamed stream *rivière des Moingoana* (Franquelin, 1684b). Thus, it is clear that Marquette's having noted in 1673 that this tribe lived on what is today called the Des Moines River opened the door for associating these people with this newfound waterway — and in rushed Franquelin. In other words, Franquelin himself invented this new hydronym, which subsequently became the standard in early European cartography, for there is no evidence indicating that the Indians or the French before Franquelin used this name for the Des Moines River. Yet, in the years that followed, French, British, and American mapmakers commonly borrowed Franquelin's name for this river (see Anonymous, 1700s; Popple, 1730; Bowen and Gibson, 1763). That having been said, the onomastic situation "on the ground" was quite a different matter.

Faced with the daunting challenge of dealing with speakers of scores of American Indian languages with unusual sounds and complex, alien morphologies and grammars, the French people who actually lived and worked in the Mississippi valley and western Great Lakes characteristically shortened tribe names into words that were easy for them to pronounce. Of course, shortening ethnonyms is not an unusual practice for humans in general. Consider, for example, in American English the shortened form "the Brits" for "the British" or the World War II moniker "the Japs" for "the Japanese". In the Illinois Country and in the West in general, Frenchmen did the same thing — and with gusto. Historical documentation makes it abundantly clear that *les Pés*, *les Cas*, and *les Mis*, for example, were the names the French used on an everyday basis for the *peewaareewa*, *kaaskaaskiwa*, and *myaamiwa*, the old Miami-Illinois names for the Peoria, Kaskaskia, and Miami peoples, respectively.⁴

In exactly the same way that the Miami-Illinois language ethnonym *peewaareewa*, for instance, lost its *-waareewa* to become French *pés*, the *-gouena* was dropped from the name *Mouingouena* by the French who followed Marquette into the Mississippi valley, that is, by those French traders, missionaries, soldiers, and *habitants* who actually lived and worked among Indians on the Mississippi. Just as they had done in shortening *peewaareewa*, *kaaskaaskiwa*, and *myaamiwa* to *les Pés*, *les Cas*, and *les Mis*, Frenchmen also refashioned the Illinois tribe name *Mouinguena* into a simple, one-syllable word any Frenchman could pronounce and would recognize. The result of this practice can be seen on period maps.

For example, near the end of what is called the French and Indian War, when Thomas Hutchins, a bilingual colonial ensign and future Revolutionary War patriot, came to the Illinois Country to survey the area, he recorded the shortened version of

our ethnonym, in the singular number, embedded within the name he got for the Des Moines River: *Riviere du Moins*, meaning literally “River of the Least,” where *Moins* is pronounced [mwɛ̃] ~ [mwɛ̃], exactly as one would expect the *Mouin-* / *Moin-* of *Mouingouena* ~ *Moingoana*, to be pronounced by the French (Hutchins, 1778). This same tribe name also appears on a map drawn by Antoine-Pierre Soulard, a resident of St. Louis in the late 1700s and early 1800s, and the official Spanish government surveyor of that area until the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Using the plural form of the ethnonym, Soulard called the Des Moines River *R. de los Moin*, which translates to English “R(iver) of the Least” (Soulard, in Wood, 1996: 186).⁵ His use of the Spanish plural form of this name distinctly indicates that he knew *los Moin* referred to an Indian tribe. However, with the Louisiana Purchase and the arrival of the Americans, the established French name for the Des Moines River was about to undergo significant changes that would pull it irrevocably away from its Native linguistic roots and render it unrecognizable as a term of American Indian origin.

When the Americans were setting out to explore the land west of the Mississippi that had been acquired from France in 1803 through the Louisiana Purchase, the old French placenaming tradition was still in force. For example, in the 1805 map by William Clark, the famous explorer of the West, which was copied by the English-born Washington, DC-based architect, surveyor, and mapmaker Nicolas King in 1806, the Des Moines River is called “River de Moin” ([Clark] [1805]). Although ungrammatical in French, Clark’s *de Moin* clearly preserved the old local Indian-based shortened French name for the river. Again in 1805, Zebulon Pike, who had been sent by the United States government to find the source of the Mississippi, wrote in his notes of that trip the name for the Des Moines River in the form (River) *De Moyen* (Pike, 1805). Translated literally from French, this name means “(River) of Medium,” “(River) of Average,” “(River) of Means”. Pike’s *Moyen* would be a local, phonologically expected native French permutation of earlier French *Moins*, and it still lay within the old French placenaming tradition. It was only in the years immediately following Pike’s important expedition up the Mississippi that the French term for “monk(s)” began to appear in the historical record as the name for the Des Moines River — and this new name, although it is in the French language, had jumped beyond the limits of the old French placenaming tradition. This new twist was the work of a French-speaking employee of the US government.

Anthony Nau, the government’s “sworn interpreter of the French language” for the Louisiana Purchase territory and a mapmaker for the US government, used Pike’s notes between April and July of 1806 for making maps of the Mississippi (Tucker, 1942: 10–11). In so doing, Nau wrote the name of the Des Moines River in the form *River des Moines*, literally “River of the Monks” (Nau, 1806). It is clear that Nau, in looking at Pike’s field notes, assumed that what Pike had intended by his meaningless *De Moyen* was *Des Moines*, meaning in French “of the Monks”. As a mapmaker, Nau would have no doubt been familiar with the earlier *Moins* spelling and, as a French speaker, he would have concluded that Pike’s *Moyen* was *Moines*, for neither *Moyen* nor *Moins* would have made any sense to him as a French placename.

In 1807, Nicolas King published Pike’s account of the Mississippi voyage in the third person (Coues, 1895: xxxiv–xxxv), and wrote the name for the river in the form *riviere des Moines* in the text and *River des Moines* on the map that he drew up to

accompany his book (King, 1807: 4, map). It is therefore on Nau's and then on King's maps that we see the earliest appearance of *Des Moines* as a name for the Des Moines River, in other words, a hydronym that includes the French term for "monks," which is the form of the placename that would become the standard modern one. The fact that the term *Des Moines* is not seen on maps until Nau wrote it on his map in 1806 suggests that the "monks" were Nau's creations, figments of his imagination.

In the end, the form *des Moines* on Nau's and King's maps, in King's publication of Pike's Mississippi voyage, not to mention the spelling "La Moine" on the map by William Clark (Clark, 1810), sealed the fate of the modern placename's form.⁶ Moreover, American maps in the 1800s are the only places we find this newly wrought placename bearing the term "monks," even as a few maps in the early 1800s continued to use Hutchins' name, i.e., the old local French name for the river with its shortened form for the long lost *Mouinguena* people.

Additional support for thinking that *Des Moines* was a neologistic hydronym dating to the opening decade of the nineteenth century is found on a map drawn by René Paul, the first surveyor of St. Louis and the surrounding territory, who used the notes of his father-in-law, Auguste Chouteau, the founder of St. Louis, to draw it. Both men were native French-speaking inhabitants of the Mississippi valley, and Chouteau was a renowned trader with far-flung posts who spent over sixty years trading with the Indians in the area. In other words, both Chouteau and Paul used the Mississippi valley's French placenames in their daily lives. Like Soulard and Hutchins mentioned above, Chouteau and Paul are to be considered authorities on the French placenames of the middle Mississippi valley. Chouteau's and Paul's name for the Des Moines River is *Riviere des Moins*, "River of the Least" (Paul, 1816), which again, morphologically speaking, clearly refers to a people. Thus, *the name that Hutchins recorded in the 1760s was still alive in French decades later*, long after the fall of New France, and even well after the Louisiana Purchase.

As one might expect, "Des Moines (River)" has been the victim of folk interpretations. Because of Nau's and King's "Moines" and Clark's own "Moine," some have thought that the name of the river owed itself to monks, Trappist monks specifically, since, as noted above, French *moines* means "monks". But Trappist monks never lived on the Des Moines River and were never associated with it historically. The French mapmaker Joseph-Nicolas Nicollet, in an 1841 publication, appears to have been the first person to question the idea of "monks" in association with the Des Moines River (Nicollet, 1841: 22). It is true that, from 1810 to 1813, a small group of Trappist monks did live at the base of the great mound at the ancient Mississippian site of Cahokia in present East St. Louis known as "Monks' Mound" (McDermott, 1940: 290–316). However, their little establishment was about 160 miles away from the Des Moines River. Furthermore, their association with the Mississippi valley occurs after the name *Des Moines* had already been established in the historical record. Hence, Trappist monks could not have been the origin of the river's name. As there were clearly people in the 1800s who knew that no monks were involved in the history of the Des Moines River, various attempts to explain what the name meant have been put forth since then, including the following more noteworthy albeit erroneous explanations.

In his report noted above, Nicollet also professed his belief that the *Moines* of *Des Moines* came from an "Algonquian" term, "Mikonang," supposedly meaning "at

the road” (Nicollet, 1841: 22). While Nicollet’s “Mikonang” is a corruption of the Ojibwe term for “road,” not only does his term not look like Marquette’s original MOING8ENA, the words for “road” in the Miami-Illinois language are the inanimate noun *miuvi* and the noun final *-ihkanawe*, neither of which bear any resemblance to MOING8ENA or even to the expert early Jesuit transliteration of the word, *Mouinguena*. In the mid-twentieth century, it was suggested by Vogel, the well-known author of books on American Indian placenames in the Midwest, that *Moines* represented the Miami-Illinois word for “loon” (*Gavia immer*) (Vogel, 1983: 48). However, the Miami-Illinois term for “loon,” which is *maankwa*, is plainly not related to MOING8ENA or *Mouinguena*. Recently it has been proposed that *Mouinguena* means “people of the portage” (Fay, 2010: 1–3). But “portage” in Miami-Illinois is *kwaantinaakani*, and “people of the portage” would be *kwaantinaakanaki*. Again, this term does not look anything like MOING8ENA or *Mouinguena*.

Mouinguena, phonetic [mooyiingweena], means “one has shit on his face”. It is composed of phonetic [mooy-] “shit, excrement,” [-iingwee] “face,” and [-na], the indefinite independent order verb suffix that translates to English “one has.” Not only are all three morphemes instantly recognizable, but the same term is also attested as a participle in an Illinois-French dictionary composed by the Jesuits around the turn of the eighteenth century and written out by Jacques Largillier of Mississippi exploration fame mentioned above.⁷ Therein, we find the same word in a different verb form, *m8ing8eta*, which Largillier translated to French “*qui a le visage plein d ordure*,” meaning “(one) who has a face full of filth” (Largillier, 1700: fol. 299), and which he explains is an “insult” (*injure*) meaning “dirty, ugly” (*sale, vilain*). The Jesuit spelling *m8ing8eta* represents phonetic [mooyiingweeta]. The parsing of this particular term results in [mooy-] “shit, excrement” [-iingwee] “face,” and [-ta], the animate participle suffix meaning “one who has.”

It may never be determined why the Peoria told Marquette that their cousins upstream were called “shit face.” Marquette no doubt knew the words for “shit” and “face” in Miami-Illinois since these terms have transparent cognate forms in the other Algonquian languages he knew. As has been suggested, the Peoria probably used this term to insult their cousins living upstream from them (Costa, 2000: 45–46). By attempting to demean the *Moinguena*, the Peoria were perhaps hoping that the French would not trade with them, but would choose to trade with the Peoria instead.

In the end, the history of the Iowa hydronym “Des Moines River” can be briefly summarized by the following progression: 1. *rivière des Moingoana* → 2. *rivière du Moins* ~ *rivière des Moins* → 3. *river des Moines/Des Moines River*. Name # 1 was created and used by French mapmakers; name # 2, which naturally has a singular and plural form of the ethnonym in it, was created and used by French speakers living in the Mississippi valley; and name # 3, dating only to the first decade of the nineteenth century, appears to have been created by Anthony Nau, a mapmaker working for the Americans who knew French but was not familiar with the old French name for the Des Moines River, for it is obvious that the latter did not faithfully transcribe the name for the river as recorded by Pike in his notes on which the mapmaker based his maps. Owing to its use by the early United States government, name # 3 became the name for the Des Moines River and eventually the name of the Iowa state capital located on its banks.

Notes

- ¹ On the authenticity of Marquette’s map, see Buisseret and Kupfer, 2011: 261–76. In Marquette’s spelling MOING8ENA, the figure 8 is a shorthand symbol for “ou” and here stands for the sound *w*. The phonemic, or underlying, form of his recording is *mooyiinkweena* (Costa, 2000: 45–46). In the pronunciation of *mooyiinkweena*, the *ee* sounds somewhat like the “ai” in English “mail” (the doubling of vowels in Miami-Illinois indicates vowel lengthening, a phonemic characteristic of that language); in words with the consonant cluster *nk*, as in *mooyiinkweena*, Miami-Illinois voices the *k* to [g], which explains why the historical spellings of this ethnonym have a “g” rather than a “k.”
- ² This spelling, by Jesuit missionary Jacques Gravier, who knew the Miami-Illinois language extremely well, is authoritative. Pierre-Charles Delliette, a young Frenchman who learned to speak Miami-Illinois and whose memoir is important for our understanding of the Illinois, also spelled the name in the same way (Pease and Werner, 1934: 342).
- ³ I am indebted to Carl Kupfer for providing me with an excellent digital copy of Franquelin’s map from 1678. *Moingana* appears on the Parkman copy while *Moingoana* is on the De La Croix copy of Franquelin’s 1684 lost map. Franquelin’s *Moingona* spelling is also found on a map of North America from 1697 in the French National Archives: ANF/Map/6JJ/75/B. I am again grateful to Mr. Kupfer for providing information about the latter map, which is a Delisle copy, as Franquelin’s original manuscript map is lost. As one might expect, some Delisle maps also evince the *Moingona* spelling.
- ⁴ The French did not just shorten these and other multiple-syllable exotic Native names; *they commonly*

shortened them into real French words, albeit into words which were unusual as ethnonyms. In other words, *les Pés*, pronounced [lepé], sounds like the French word for “the Sword,” “the P’s,” or even “the Farts,” depending on one’s own inclination and/or French regional dialect; *les Cas*, pronounced [leká], sounds like “the Cases”; and *les Mis*, pronounced [lemi], sounds like “the Piths of Bread,” or “the Ones Who Are Put.” Another reduction of this sort involving the tribe name “Potawatomi” is *les Poux*, meaning not too attractively “the Lice.” The reader should note that the ethnonyms presented here in the Miami-Illinois language such as *peewaareewa* are in the singular number. Documentary evidence indicates that historical Miami-Illinois speakers commonly used the singular form of an ethnonym as the name for an entire nation, as if an entire nation were embodied in one person, whereas French and English speakers, as they do today, usually used the plural form of an ethnonym in their own languages for designating an entire group of people. The reader should note that phonemic spellings, even of proper names, do not begin with an upper-case letter.

⁵ For Soulard, see Wood, 1996: 6.

⁶ Two anonymous maps by the same English-speaking American author have “Le Moin River”: [Sketch of Part of the Upper Mississippi at the Close of the War of 1812]. [1815–1816]; and [Sketch of the Mississippi from 33° N. to Rock River]. [ca. 1818]. Both are in Tucker, 1942: pls. XXXIX and XXV, respectively. For Hutchins’ years in the midcontinent, see <http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/legacy_files/migrated/findingaid308hutchins.pdf> [Accessed November 14 2014].

⁷ McCafferty, 2011: 188–97.

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Notes on contributor

Michael McCafferty, author of *Native American Place-names of Indiana*, is an ethnolinguist specializing in the Miami-Illinois language and Mississippi valley French. He teaches at Indiana University. He also works for the Miami people with language revitalization, serving as French translator of the three Miami-Illinois language dictionaries created by French missionaries.

Correspondence to Michael McCafferty, 307 Memorial Hall, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA. Email: mmccaffe@indiana.edu