

## Wetaug — A Place-name Puzzle

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THE VILLAGE OF WETAUG is located on Illinois Route 51, about twenty miles north of the Ohio River, in the Illinois area called 'Egypt' (a popular name which is applied to the whole of southern Illinois). According to popular tradition, the village got its name from a Cherokee chief who died there in 1838 when a large band of Cherokee Indians crossed southern Illinois on their way to new homes in Oklahoma Territory. The writer recalls that several years ago a friend pointed out Chief Wetaug's grave in the yard of a residence in the village. Enquiry among the people of the Wetaug vicinity indicates that local residents accept the Chief Wetaug legend as the authentic explanation of how their village got its name.

The popular explanation of Wetaug has also found its way into print in a number of recent publications dealing with southern Illinois lore. In "Egyptian Place-Names" (*Egyptian Key*, March, 1947), Griffith says "... and Wetaug was named for an offshoot of the Cherokee which remained in the vicinity after the tragic trek of the Cherokee from North Carolina and Georgia to the present Oklahoma." Griffith thus limited his explanation to a branch of the Cherokee tribe, with nothing about 'Chief Wetaug.' The *Illinois . . . Guide* (Chicago, 1939, 1947) also suggests the 'tribe' explanation but adds: "The grave of one of the chiefs of the tribe is on the grounds of a local residence." Clarence Bonnell, in *The Illinois Ozarks* (Harrisburg, 1946) went all the way: "It is said that Chief Wetaug was one of those who traveled alone or in small groups and that he lingered about where the village of Wetaug is located. He died there. His grave is known. It is said to be in a yard in the village." In *Echoes of the Red Man* (New York, 1955), Irvin Peithmann says, "The town of Wetaug in Pulaski County gets its name from a Cherokee chief who died here during that winter in southern Illinois."

Whether Indian chief or branch of tribe, Wetaug is obviously considered Cherokee in origin by popular decision and among recent writers of southern Illinois history and lore. It is only when we turn to other sources of information that we find reason to wonder about the correctness of the popular explanation, which has its origin in oral tradition only.

In his *History of Alexander, Union and Pulaski Counties, Illinois* (Chicago, 1883), W. H. Perrin is silent on the origin, merely saying that the first settler, a man named Sowers, "settled at the Big Spring, as it was called, and which is now in the village of Wetaug in 1816." Perrin's county histories are noted for the inclusion of all sorts of odd lore, but the omission of the story of Chief Wetaug is not necessarily significant. Then, in 1884, W. K. Ackerman, an ex-president of the Illinois Central Railroad, published his *Early Illinois Railroads*, in which he stated that Wetaug was named for a town in Massachusetts, by George Watson, Division Superintendent of the Illinois Central. Watson was in office at the time the railroad was being built, and many of the towns along the road were named by company officials. Modern atlases and other sources consulted fail to show any Massachusetts town named Wetaug; but just across the border in northwestern Connecticut there is a flurry of Wetaugs, centering in Salisbury Town(ship). In fact, Wetaug (also spelled *Wesatogue*, *Wiatiak*, and by the Dutch *Wootawk*) was the Indian name of Salisbury Town, or of part of it. In "Place-Names in Salisbury, Connecticut" (*Names*, June 1958), Morse Allen states:

In 1723, when Wetaug's boundaries were written down, it meant the northeast quarter of the present town; its western boundary was the hill range east of Salisbury village, *Wetauwanchu* "Wetaug mountain," and today in speech, though not on the maps, commonly shortened to Wetauk Mountain. Older maps show a Wetaug hamlet over two miles south of the Massachusetts line, but the G.S. 1884-95 map puts it almost on the line. The only survival of the name on the current G.S. map is Wetaug Road, which follows the west bank of the Housatonic from near Falls Village some eight miles north to Massachusetts.

The fact that 'Wetaug' is in good standing as a New England place-name of Indian origin lends considerable credence to the Ackerman claim concerning the origin of our own Wetaug. The Illinois Central Railroad was completed in September, 1856; and on December 6, 1856, the Wetaug post office was established. The date of the opening of the post office called Wetaug thus falls within the active period of the division superintendent George Watson, whom Ackerman credits with naming Wetaug from New England sources.

From a purely factual point of view, the Ackerman explanation has much to recommend it. However, it seems to be practically unknown among local people. Ask almost any native of the area about the origin of the name and he more or less automatically repeats the story of Chief Wetaug. Sentiment favors the 'Chief Wetaug' explanation. Through wide popular acceptance, the legend of Chief Wetaug has supplanted Mr. Ackerman's original factual explanation of how *Wetaug* got its name.

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