

Names in Brief

Settling *Laurel's* Business

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I SHOULD LIKE TO CALL the attention of United States place name students to the possibility that *laurel* in *Laurel Hill*, West Virginia and Pennsylvania, is not from the North American mountain laurel but (by folk etymology) from (1) either Delaware *lawi* or Shawnee *lāwi*, each a reflex of the Proto-Algonquian stem **θāwi* 'middle,' or (2) either Delaware *lawi*¹ or Shawnee *laawi* (Voegelin), each a reflex of the Proto-Algonquian stem **lāwi* 'far,' 'too far,' 'falls short.' Possibility Number One has already been mentioned by some local historians; the meaning of *Laurel Hill* from PA **θāwi* would be 'Middle Mountain.' Possibility Number Two is my own suggestion,² and has heretofore been unprinted. The meaning of *Laurel Hill* from PA **lāwi* would be 'Far or Distant Mountain.'

The hill in question is part of a significant range of the Appalachian Mountains, and stretches from north central West Virginia into southwestern Pennsylvania. It is called *Laurel Hill* (1755, 1780) and *Laurel Mountain* (1780, 1894, 1904) in West Virginia; in Pennsylvania it is called *Laurel Hill*. Parallel to it lies Chestnut Ridge, Pennsylvania, the northern section of which on some maps bears the name *Laurel Hill*. Loyalhanna Creek emerges from the west side of Chestnut Ridge. In the valley between Chestnut Ridge and Laurel Hill proper lay the old Delaware Indian town, *Loyalhanna (the site today of Ligonier, Pa.).

In *West Virginia Place Names Their Origin and Meaning*,³ I attribute Laurel Hill to the abundance of difficult laurel thickets. It

Note: The asterisk indicates prototypes and extinct place names; ? is used for the glottal stop; *aa* stands for *ā*; PA means Proto-Algonquian.

¹ Found in the compound *lawat* 'long ago.'

² I am indebted to the Reverend James A. Geary.

³ Piedmont, W. Va., 1945, pp. 361-62.

would be hard to prove that Laurel Hill does not owe its name to this shrub. The French called it *Mons de Lauriers*; the maps of Fry and Jefferson (1751) and Bew (1780) designate it as *Laurel Thickets*. Laurel abounds in the locality: in Pennsylvania it is the state flower; each June, in West Virginia, it covers entire mountain sides with its pink and purple blossoms.

Claude W. Maxwell⁴ declares, however, that there is "considerable reason" to believe that *Laurel Hill* is not from the laurel, but from the Delaware word meaning 'middle.' It would mean 'Middle Mountain,' Maxwell concludes; and, as though it were significant, he states that "Loyal hanna in 'Penns Woods' is derived from Laurel-hanne meaning 'Middle Stream.'" A later writer, West Virginia newspaper editor Calvin Price,⁵ recalls a tradition that *laurel* in *Laurel Hill* was originally pronounced "like *lauya* is spelled"; and he comments, "It is said to mean middle or dividing." Stating that "... on the white man's tongue *lauya* could soon become laurel," Price adds, "I have been told that Laurel Mountain is the highest land east of the Ozarks until the Back Alleghanies are reached."

On the foregoing remarks by Maxwell and Price, one must comment (1) that the spelling "Laurel hanne" (for *Loyalhanne*) needs verification; (2) that any mountain between two other mountains can be described as *middle*; and (3) that *laurel* can as easily and plausibly come from PA **lāwi* (Delaware *lawi*,⁶ Shawnee *laawi* /Voegelin/) 'far,' 'too far,' 'falls short,' as from PA **θāwi* (Delaware *lawi*, Shawnee *lāwi*) 'middle.' The meaning would then be 'Far or Distant Mountain,' which describes the range even more appropriately than 'Middle.' It should be noticed, as regards the two prototypes, that PA **θ* and PA **L* both give *l* in Delaware and Shawnee — which means that PA **θāwi* and PA **lāwi* fall together in Delaware and Shawnee to give the homophones *lawi* and *laawi* (Voegelin). The other descendants of the two stems are found today as (1) from PA **θāwi* 'middle' — Abnaki *nōwi* (borrowed), Algonkin *naw*, Cree *tāw*, Fox *nāwi*, Menominee *nāw*, Natick *nōeu* and Ojibwa *nāwi*; and (2) from PA **lāwi* 'far,' 'too far,' 'falls short' — Algonkin *naw-i*

⁴ "Indian Names in West Virginia," *Magazine of History — Biography of Randolph County Historical Society*, 1924, pp. 67–70.

⁵ *Pocahontas Times* (Marlington, W. Va.), April 27, 1939.

⁶ Found in the compound *lawat* 'long ago.'

(Cuoq), Cree *yāwi* (Lacombe, 660), Fox *nāwi-*, Menominee *no ʔsōh-*, Narragansett *nāwwatick* (Williams), Natick *nō* (Trumbull) and Ojibwa *nāwi* (Jones's Ojibwa Texts).

The Delaware Indians were in the Laurel Hill region, Pennsylvania, as early as 1724. The name of their settlement (**Loyalhanning*, **Loyalhannon*, **Loyal Hanin Old Town*) contains either Delaware *lawi* 'middle,' or Delaware *lawi* from PA **lāwi* 'far,' 'too far,' 'falls short,' both of which resemble Calvin Price's traditional "lauya." In Shawnee these stems are *lāwi* and *laawi*, homophones. They also resemble "lauya." Though the Shawnees did not live as near Laurel Hill as the Delawares, yet there were 350 Shawnee warriors in western Pennsylvania in 1732; and after 1748 the 600 Shawnee people on the Ohio were joined by kindred Shawnees from the Susquehanna.

Though there is a good basis for the origin from *laurel*, one cannot ignore the possibility that Laurel Hill in Pennsylvania and West Virginia takes its name by folk etymology from either Delaware *lawi* (Shawnee *lāwi*) 'middle,' or Delaware *lawi* (Shawnee *laawi*) from PA 'far,' 'too far,' 'falls short.' In history one or the other of these homophones is the principal stem in **Loyalhanning* and (1769) **Lawunakhannek*,⁷ the names of two extinct Delaware Indian towns. Depending on which stem really occurs, the two names may mean either 'Where there is a middle stream,' or 'Where there is a distant stream.' And it appears plausible that one or the other of the homophones may occur in *Lonaconing*, a difficult Western Maryland place name. Certainly one or the other of the homophones occurs in the two current Algonquian stream names, *Loyalhanna* and *Loyalsock*. Donehoo⁸ gives only part of the problem when he says that they both mean 'Middle Creek.' They could as easily be from PA **lāwi* and mean 'Far Creek.' To ascertain that one of these pairs of stems occurs in *Laurel Hill* would be to revive for posterity an old and important Algonquian place name.

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⁷ George P. Donehoo, *A History of the Indian Villages and Place Names in Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg [1928]), p. 89.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 98–99.