

# The Standardization of Spelling in Ohio Settlement and Stream Names of Indian Origin

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AN INSPECTION of the modern map of Ohio indicates a surprisingly small percentage of place-names whose origins are American Indian. Mainly they appear as either settlement or stream names; very few Indian names are still applied to hills or swamps. Anyone who traces these ancient names back to their first recorded use by white men cannot help but be impressed by the casual and perhaps careless spelling of earlier years. But at some time in the history of the state, the names of Indian origin became stabilized in form. This short paper represents an attempt to determine when this standardization occurred. Variant spellings on several hundred sources, both maps and texts, have been inspected and recorded.

The origins of Ohio's place-names stemming from Indian languages have been studied in much detail by Professor August Mahr,\* and that special subject will not be reviewed here. It should be noted, however, that the wide range of spellings represents attempts of the earliest settlers to convert Indian phonetics into an alphabet of twenty-six letters, a problem complicated by the fact that many of the Ohio pioneers were either illiterate or of extremely limited educational achievement. Under the circumstances it is no great wonder that it took a long period for the spelling of Indian names to gain general acceptance in a standard form.

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\* August C. Mahr, "Indian River and Place Names in Ohio," *Ohio Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 66 (1957), 137-158; "Practical Reasons for Algonkian Stream and Place Names," *Ohio Journal of Science*, Vol. 59 (1959) 6, 365-374. Related literature includes William D. Overman, "Ohio Town Names," Akron, Atlantic Press, 1958; Lloyd A. Brown, "Early Maps of the Ohio Valley," U. of Pittsburgh, 1959; David Lindsey, "Place Names in Ohio's Western Reserve," *Names*, Vol. 2 (1954) 40-45; H. F. Raup, "Names of Ohio's Streams," *Names*, Vol. 5 (1957), 162-168.

*Settlement Names*

At the present time, about 100 Ohio towns, cities, and communities bear names of Indian origin – a very small proportion of the total named communities in the state. Of the hundred, sixty-four names have been spelled in the same way since they first appeared on maps. Among the unstable or unstandardized name forms, the oldest include Mingo Junction, Muskingum, Tawawa, Tuscarawas, and Wakatomika. These five represent the widest range in variant spellings. Among newer names, Kinnikinnick is still spelled variably in spite of a BGN decision. A sampling of a half dozen of the most variable names appears in Table I.

Table I. Ohio Settlements Bearing Names of Indian Origin

Names	Number of Variant Spellings	Present Form Stable
Wapakoneta	12	1847
Conotton	4	1842
Levanna (Indian?)	4	1869
Piqua	4	1802
Tuscarawas	3	1766
Chillicothe	3	1842

The period of greatest spelling instability occurs between 1840 and 1860. Between the earliest date, 1766 and the latest date, 1960, the median year in which stabilization occurred was 1874, when numerous “centennial” county atlases and histories were being published – in itself a probable factor in forcing Ohio residents to standardize forms of Indian place-names. After 1880 spelling was stabilized largely in response to efforts of the Post Office Department to achieve uniformity in the spelling of postal names.

*Stream Names*

Names of streams and towns of Indian origin appeared on eighteenth century maps in about equal numbers, but neither appeared in large numbers; place-name density was low. Early maps of Ohio (before 1800) commonly bore the names of thirteen streams, though not necessarily with these spelling forms: Ashtabula Creek,

Ashtabula River, Captina Creek, Conneaut Creek, Cuyahoga River, Hocking River, Huron River, Maumee River (usually Miami in spelling), Muskingum River, Nimishillen Creek, Pymatuning Creek, Sandusky River, and Scioto River. Of these names, Ashtabula Creek and Huron River did not appear with variant spellings. The total number of Ohio stream names of Indian origin is eighty-one (excluding repeat names like Little Muskingum River or Little Miami River) of which thirty-six seem to have been spelled consistently since they were first used by the white man. The total of eighty-one, like the Indian-named settlements, is very small in relation to the total number of stream names.

It is significant that the degree of instability of stream names is considerably higher (64 per cent vs. 44 per cent) than that of town names. There was no official body such as the postal department directly concerned with the spelling of stream names; hence it is probable that those who used stream names of Indian origin felt greater freedom to spell as they pleased, rather than conforming to accepted spelling patterns. Stream names of highest instability in spelling are presented in Table II.

Table II. Ohio Streams Bearing Names of Indian Origin

Names	Number of Variant Spellings	Present Form Stable after
Wakatomika Creek	12	1940
Cuyahoga River	10	1876
Muskellunge Creek	9	1940
Macochee Creek	8	1939
Maumee River	8	1873
Buckongahelas Creek	6	1940
Conneaut Creek	6	1850
Captina Creek	5	1817
Conotton Creek	5	1900
Mohican Creek	5	1841
Nimisila Creek	5	1950
Hocking River	4	1906
Kinnikinnick Creek	4	1880
Oppossum Creek (Monroe Co.)	4	1916
Nimishillen Creek	4	1897
Scioto River	4	1824
Tymochtee Creek	4	1850

With 1766 as the first date and 1960 as the last, the median year of stabilization in spelling was 1881, somewhat later than 1874 when most town names had already acquired standardized forms. The spelling of stream names became stabilized most frequently between 1830 and 1910.

### *Conclusion*

The early settlers in Ohio generally rejected many Indian place-names which must have been in current use in the eighteenth century, and substituted a wide variety of names from other sources. The fact that the Indian languages used by the larger tribes (Huron, Shawnee, Delaware) had to be transferred from oral sources to written forms may well have precluded their use in large numbers.

Further, many Indian names were long and difficult for the illiterate white settlers to pronounce, let alone spell. The few place-names of Indian origin that did survive were used mainly for settlements and streams, but a century of occupation by the white man elapsed before any satisfactory degree of uniformity in spelling of Indian place-names was achieved – generally about the third quarter of the nineteenth century. For the names of towns, the postal department was influential in stabilizing spellings, but for stream names the only federal agency authorized to approve spellings was the Board on Geographic Names, whose influence in this matter was relatively slight.

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### NOTICE

Attention is called to the Names Institute to be held in May at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Please write to Professor E. Wallace McMullen for details. An announcement will also appear in a forthcoming issue of the Bulletin.