

The Name *Wisconsin*¹

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A FAMOUS JOURNEY, the exploration of the Mississippi (1673) by Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette, first made known to the world the name *Miskonsing* (*Meskousing*) for the tributary, today the Wisconsin, whereby these men entered the great river. History tells why they made the journey. It is more to our purpose to comment that they were somewhat learned men and good linguists. Jolliet had studied in France; in America he had learned to converse in Algonquian. Marquette had studied Montagnais for two years, and during four years (while in charge of various western missions) he had succeeded in mastering several Algonquian dialects. On the present journey, pausing at the village of the Mascoutens (inhabited also [June 1673] by Kickapoo and Miami tribes), the two men, using their Algonquian skills, found guides and continued on to the Mississippi.

¹ Guest Editor's Note: H. L. Mencken correctly remarks (Supp. II, *Am. Lang.*, p. 567): "If . . . [Stewart's] theory is sound, then *Oregon* and *Wisconsin* both come from the same source." Thus it seems fitting to supplement Professor Stewart's commentary by Dr. Taube's discussion of the meaning of *Wisconsin*. The Subject is, however, a much debated one. H. W. Kuhm ("Indian Place-Names in Wisconsin," *Wis. Archeologist*, 33, Nos. 1-2, n. s., 1952) records seven different meanings for the name. Charles F. Hockett ("Potawatomi I . . .," *IJAL* XIV, No. 1) ascribes *Wisconsin* to Potawatomi *wecks'unyak* "towards where it is cold." Later ("Reactions to Indian Place Names," *Am. Sp.*, XXV, No. 2, May 1950) he modifies this statement: ". . . *Wisconsin* may be from Potawatomi *wecks'unyak* 'where it is cold — the north,' but is more likely from a kindred Menominee form." Hockett's etymology depends on the debatable assumption that the original name began with *W*-. Neither Frederick Cassidy (v. Stewart) nor George Stewart (*NOL*, 1958, p. 456) commits himself to a meaning, but Stewart has suggested that there be a chirographical study.

Lately, Virgil Vogel has discussed *Wisconsin* ("Wisconsin's Name: A Linguistic Puzzle," *Wis. Mag. of History*, 48, No. 3, 1965). Though he comes to no avowed conclusion, he proposes, as a new view, "red earth place." This interpretation led to correspondence with Donald Chaput who (*Wis. Mag. of History*, XLIX [Summer, 1966], p. 352) accepts Dr. Vogel's analysis as far as the "red" (Fox *me'ckwi-*; PA

As to the records of the trip, Jolliet, staying longer in the west, lost his in 1674 in the rapids above Montreal. However, when he reached Quebec (July 29, 1674) he dictated from memory an account of the expedition, which, revised, Frontenac sent to Paris (Nov. 16, 1674) as an official report. In this document first appears the original form of the name *Wisconsin*, viz. *rivière de Miskonsing*.² Later, still relying on memory, Jolliet drew the map often called the "Jolliet Map of 1674."³ And here again appears the name *Riviere*

**meskwi-* "red...") is concerned, but parts from him by trying to see in the name a description of the red earth of an iron ore region. In the same magazine (p. 353) Vogel sympathizes with Chaput, but declares that "no iron mine has ever been discovered near the Wisconsin River." In the winter issue (1967), the discussion was taken up by a Mrs. Hackbarth, who disputes Vogel's statement about iron ore near the Wisconsin River. Dr. Vogel answers this letter, too; he admits being wrong about the iron ore, but still feels that there is not enough evidence to link *Wisconsin* to the presence of iron or copper.

Though Dr. Taube's article is perhaps the latest to deal with *Wisconsin*, a part of his etymology was discussed in November, 1947, by the late Professor James A. Geary (letter to Clifford L. Lord, Director, the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*). At that time Professor Geary felt that — though the assumption of an original *M-* (i.e., *Miskonsing*, *Meskousing*) was reasonable — it was phonetically "impossible" for the *Mis-* to be "great" (Fox *Mesi-*, Ojibwa *Misi-*; PA **me'ci-*) because the first syllable is really *misk-* or *miskaw-*, not *mis* + *k*, a combination not typical of Algonquian languages. The combination of *Misi* + *k* would be acceptable, but no form with this necessary intervening vowel (*-i-*) seems to exist.

The guest editor is inclined to accept Dr. Taube's belief that, at least phonetically, the original *Mis-* or *Mes-* of the modern *Wisconsin* can be from "great" (PA **me'ci-*). The *-i-* of the stem **me'ci-* could be syncopeated in such a language as Potawatomi; indeed William Jones (v. George McAleer, *A Study of . . . Missisquoi*, Worcester, 1906, p. 32) designates the stem as *Mes*, *Mis*, or *Mch*. An alternative explanation is that the name uttered to Jolliet and Marquette began with *mesi* + *k*, and that *they* syncopeated it.

But let us have Professor Taube speak for himself!

² Pierre Margry (ed.), *Découvertes et établissements des Français*, I (Paris, 1876), p. 259.

³ Actual title: "Nouvelle Découverte de Plusieurs Nations Dans La Nouvelle France en L'année 1673 et 1674." The MS of this map is in the John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Rhode Island. A facsimile reproduction from *Revue de Géographie* (Feb., 1880) appears in the *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Reuben G. Thwaites, ed.), LIX (Cleveland, 1900), facing p. 86. A reduced reproduction is found in *Indian Villages of the Illinois Country*, Scientific Papers, Illinois State Museum, II (Springfield, 1942), Part I (*Atlas*), plate IV. Also noteworthy here is plate V, a reduced reproduction of Marquette's original map. For critical comments, see Jean Delanglez, *Life and Voyages of Louis Jolliet 1645–1700* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 67–81.

Miskonsing. In a still later map (1681), though *-ing* is omitted, the name once more appears (*Rivière Miskovs*),⁴ and here one supposes that the *u* (= *v*) is a mistake for *n*.⁵

In the meantime, Father Marquette, also bearing precious linguistic records, had gone to St. Francis Xavier Mission, near the present Green Bay, Wisconsin. There he finished a map⁶ on which he drew only the last 100 miles of the Wisconsin, and moreover gave the river no name. But in a journal he forwarded to his superior, Dablon, in (autumn) 1674,⁷ Marquette uses the new name twice: (1) at the beginning of a descriptive paragraph he mentions "La Rivière sur laquelle nous nous embarquâmes s'appelle MesKousing"; (2) referring to the Mississippi, he remarks, "elle est étroite à sa décharge de MesKous."⁸ Because Marquette gives the name right after the details of crossing the portage, some writers have assumed that the explorers first heard it spoken by their two Miami guides.⁹

From the very start there were discrepancies in the spelling, with Jolliet recording *Miskonsing* (Official Report 1674; map 1674), and *Miskovs* (map 1681), and Marquette recording *MesKousing*, *Miskovs* (Journal 1681). Further spelling changes quickly followed. The *M* began to appear as *Ou*, *k* became *c*, *g* dropped off. Writers sometimes used two or more variants in the same sentence, and map makers two different spellings on the same map. By the end of the eighteenth century *Ouisconsin* had become the favorite form; but by then

⁴ The original of this map (*Carte genlle de la France sept^{le} . . . par le Sr Jolliet*), drawn by Franquelin, is in the library of the Service Hydrographique de la Marine (Paris). Harvard College Library has a copy.

⁵ Professor James A. Geary (letter, 1947) prefers *Miskons* because of Baraga's *Wishkons*, probably based on an Indian pronunciation.

⁶ Marquette's manuscript map is in the archives of St. Mary's College, Montreal. A modified reproduction (some names not in Marquette's handwriting) is included in the *Jesuit Relations*, LIX, facing p. 108. For information and conjectures, see Louise Phelps Kellogg, *The French Régime in Wisconsin and the Northwest* (Madison, 1925), pp. 166-167, 193 and 200 (note 29); also see Jean Delanglez, *op. cit.*, pp. 61 to 67.

⁷ Later published in Paris (1681) as *Découverte de quelque pays et nations de l'Amérique Septentrionale*. See Francis B. Steck, *The Jolliet-Marquette Expedition 1673* (Quincy, Ill., 1928), p. 264. In addition to some debatable opinions, Steck's book brings many pertinent, though small, map reproductions.

⁸ The excerpts from Marquette's narrative journal were obtained from the *Jesuit Relations*, LIX, pp. 106 and 108.

⁹ Cf. Louise Phelps Kellogg, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

too, *W* had begun to replace the *Ou*, especially in North America. When the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature officially endorsed *Wisconsin* on January 30, 1845, the spelling of the name for modern times and for all practical uses was settled. This form (*Wisconsin*) with *W* changed back to *M* (*Misconsin*) is the name the etymologist must explain!

The researcher who seeks the true meaning of *Wisconsin* soon finds that his path has been well trodden. A list of printed translations includes "gathering of the waters," "wild, rushing channel," "great stone," "red rock," "a good place . . . to live," "river of a thousand isles," "river with the flowery banks," "holes in the bank of a stream in which birds nest," and "the small lodge of a beaver or muskrat." All of these interpretations are demonstrably wrong. The *c* [k] in the name discredits "great stone," even though there are rocks and steep bluffs in the lower valley; "red rock" cannot be correct because the sandstones and dolomites of the Wisconsin gorge are not red. The vague "gathering of the waters" seems to ignore the fact that Jolliet and Marquette studied the river along its lower course. "Wild rushing channel" (cf. Ojibwa *mashkaw*- "strong, powerful," Cree *mihkaw*- "[run] strongly, fast" + *-si*- "rush, etc."), unless it refers to the falls at Grand Rapids, belies the tranquility of the lower stream. Indeed it is no wonder that Reuben G. Thwaites, Wisconsin historian, remarked (1908): "The meaning of the original word . . . is now unknown,"¹⁰ or that Chrysostom Verwyst declared, after a vain search: "I have not found two Indians to agree on the meaning of this word."¹¹

The Solution

The present study is based on the belief that the form in *M*- is the correct one, the one to be solved, and that the forms in *W*- are the result of later misreadings of *M*-. It also seems likely to the

¹⁰ Reuben G. Thwaites, *Wisconsin, The Americanization of a French Settlement* (N. Y., 1908), p. 233. Also see George E. Shankle, *State Names* (N. Y., 1941), p. 91; and Henry E. Legler, *Origin and Meaning of Wisconsin Place-Names*, Trans. of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, XIV (Madison, 1902), Part 1, p. 22.

¹¹ Chrysostom Verwyst, *Geographical Names in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan, Having a Chippewa Origin*, Wisconsin Historical Collections, XII (Madison, 1892), p. 398.

present writer that the *n*, and not *u*, is the right letter in the second syllable of the name, though this assumption is less material. To be solved, then, is a word of three syllables, ending in *-g*, viz. *Miskonsing* (*Meskousing*).

-ing (PA **-enki*), Local Suffix

A readily apparent fact gives the search a good start: *Miskous* and *Miskonsing* (*Meskousing*) are essentially the same except for the locative suffix *-ing*, which may be translated with "at."¹² Leaving off the locative suffix was a rather common practice. In his *Prise de Possession* of 1689, the fur trader Nicolas Perrot mentions as one of his witnesses the Franch commandant "aux environs d'Ouiskouche sur le Mississipi."¹³ Bound for the Sauks and Foxes of Iowa, Rev. Cutting Marsh of Statesburg (near today's Kaukauna, Wisconsin) in 1834 followed the route taken many years before by Jolliet and Marquette. On a sketch map accompanying his journal, *Map of the Mississippi & its tributaries*, there appears for the Wisconsin River the name *Wis-kose-sepo* (*sepo* "river"; PA **sēpe-*).¹⁴ Bishop Baraga observed, as late as 1880, that the Chippewas used *Wishkons* for the name of the state and *Wishkonsi-sibi* for the river.¹⁵

Mis(i)-, Mes(i)- (PA **me'ci-*) "big"

Consul W. Butterfield, Wisconsin historian, suggests that Algonquian "big" (Fox *me'ci-*, Men. *mi'si-*, Cheyenne *ma'xi-*, etc.) is the first element of *Miskonsing* (*Meskousing*). The present writer also maintains this opinion, and feels that it is not surprising, when one considers the abundance of the stem "big" (PA **me'ci-*) in Algonquian place names, several of them near the Wisconsin. One thinks of Michigan, Michigamme, Missisauga, Mississippi, Missisnewa in the Middle West, of Massanutten in Virginia, and of Mashamoquet, Mashapaug, Mashpee, Massabesic, Massachusetts,

¹² Among others, Geo. Lemoine discusses this locative suffix in his *Dictionnaire Francais-Algonquin* (Chicoutimi, 1909), p. 7.

¹³ Pierre Margry, *op. cit.*, V (Paris, 1883), pp. 33-34.

¹⁴ The journal and sketch-map are in the library of the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

¹⁵ Frederic Baraga, *A Dictionary of the Otchipwe Language* (Montreal, 1880) Part 2 p. 421.

Massapeag, and Missisquoi in the North and East. And to the critic who would insist that there must be a vowel between *s* and *k* (i.e., *Misik-*) it can be answered: (1) that there are examples of the absence or loss of the *i-* of PA **meʔci-* in Mashnee Island (Massachusetts), Mashpaug Ponds (Rhode Id.), and Mashpee (Mass.); and (2) that *Miskonsing* may be from a language such as Potawatomi, where there is syncopation, or that the French syncopated the vowel (*Misik* > *Misk-*) when they heard the name from the Indians. The variant form *Massikousing* (Vander Aa Map, Leide, 1780), where a vowel intrudes, suggests how easily this could happen.¹⁶

-*kons-* (-*kous-*), PA **-kancyä* (?), “point”

When Trumbull studied the composition of Indian geographical names, he concluded that many Algonquian place names are made up of an adjectival and a substantival element, with or without a locative suffix.¹⁷ *Miskonsing* (*Meskousing*) fits this pattern. Accordingly, the substantival element *kons* (*kous*) poses the final linguistic problem, now that the adjectival element (*Misi-*; PA **meʔci-*) and the locative suffix (*-ing*; PA **-enki*) have been explored.

The exact stem chosen to explain the second element (-*cons-*, -*cous-*)¹⁸ of *Wisconsin*, the substantival element, must not only have morphological fitness, but a meaning that is fitting geographically. A stem that means stone, or swift current, or island, or coldness, etc., would not do. However, because there is a well-known physical feature, a prominent headland, directly south of the Wisconsin, at the confluence, it is evident that Algonquian “point” would be suitable.

¹⁶ *Messipi*, Allouez’s form (v. *Jes. Relations*, LI, Cleveland, 1899, p. 52) for *Mississippi*, has no vowel after the *mes-*. This is a clear case of an earlier *mesi-* + *sipo* and favors the present argument.

¹⁷ James H. Trumbull, *The Composition of Indian Geographical Names*, Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society, II (Hartford, 1870), p. 5.

¹⁸ Jolliet’s -*kons-* and Marquette’s -*kous-* suggest, to explain most simply the difference between the two forms, that *n* was misread for *u*, or vice versa. Another explanation is that the vowel in -*kous-* was nasalized, giving -*kons-*. The stem is found with *n* in Ojibwa (-*ganji-*), Algonkin (-*kânji-*), and Powhatan (*Mekonse*). However, no cognate place name examples have an *n*, which makes Marquette’s *Meskousing* look like a better form than Jolliet’s *Miskonsing*. See, however, the opinion of J. A. G., note 5.

Geography, then, confirms the fitness of "point" (PA *-kancyä?); but are there, here and there in Algonquian, cognate forms that sufficiently correspond to the -cons-, -cous- of *Wisconsin* to justify an equation (PA *-kancyä- > -cons-, -cous-)?

Most of the examples of Algonquian "peak, point, peninsula" are found in the East. Because of the common origin of all Algonquian dialects, the Eastern examples, with small phonetic and semantic variations, would also hold for Central Algonquian. In the East, to begin with Natick,¹⁹ one finds *kóus*, *ukqs*, *kóüs* "anything sharp or pointed," "thorn"; and in Micmac²⁰ one finds *kwěsawā* "a point of land," "peninsula." Trumbull (*ibid.*) cites *kussohkóí*, *kussohkoiyeu* "a (high) peak or point of rock or earth." Douglas-Lithgow's *Quaise Point* "the end or point" seems to be made up of the Algonquian original (*Quaise* "point") and its translation.²¹

Place name students have also found instances where this stem is joined to other place name elements. Trumbull believes that New Hampshire's *Kearsarge* begins with *koowasse*, so that the name signifies "pointed or peaked mountain."²² Ruttenber asserts that the Mohegan *Kussuhkoe* "high" determines the meaning of *Quassaic* name of a creek at Newburgh, N.Y., and stresses the fact that settlers knew the area as "Highlands."²³ Mrs. Eckstorm notes that the English name "Indian Point," at Bucksport, Maine, has been translated as *Alnambi* - *kweysahwayk*. She feels certain that the first element of *Kouesanouskek*, South Thomaston, is *Kwesawayk* "a point of land." For the first word in the compound *Quisquamago*, Thomaston, she spells out *Kwesah* "point, cape, peninsula," and supports it with *kwesahweik* "a point" and *kwesahwahkek* "a peninsula," from the Abnaki dictionary by Father Rasles.²⁴

¹⁹ James H. Trumbull, *Natick Dictionary* BAE, Bull. 25 (Washington 1903), pp. 277 and 41.

²⁰ Silas T. Rand, *Dictionary of the Language of the Micmac Indians* (Halifax, 1888), pp. 199 and 193.

²¹ Robert A. Douglas-Lithgow, *Nantucket, A History* (N.Y., 1914), pp. 31 and 281.

²² James H. Trumbull, *The Composition of Indian Geographical Names*, p. 20.

²³ Edward M. Ruttenber, "Footprints of the Red Men," *Proc. New York State Hist. Assoc.*, VI (Newburgh, 1906), pp. 128-129.

²⁴ Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, *Indian Place-Names of the Penobscot Valley and the Maine Coast* (Orono, 1941), pp. 3, 82 and 83.

More important for our analysis is the fact that many place name instances of the use of "point," "promontory" (PA *-*kancyä* ?) occur in the closely related Central Algonquian dialects, such as Mascouten, Kickapoo, Miami, Illinois, Sauk, and Fox. Going down the Mississippi River, Jolliet and Marquette visited two Illinois (Peoria) villages on the west bank, in present-day Iowa, then renewed their acquaintance with these people, now back at their permanent home, when returning by way of the Illinois River. A vocabulary of the Peoria language lists the word *Kwésawéyik* "promontory, point of land advancing into water," together with its abbreviation *Kwésa* (in compounds).²⁵ It seems likely that the Miamis, notably those interviewed by the explorers at the village of the Mascoutens, were also familiar with the "promontory" meaning, especially since they were near kinsmen of the Peoria Illinois. And, as a matter of fact, other applications of the stem do happen to be recorded for the Miami dialect: *kaša* "hoof" and *kaši* "fingernail or toenail."²⁶ Cf. *Oshkosh*, which seems to be from Menominee *-kasi-* "fingernail."

Conclusion: "at the great point"

To bear out this meaning there must, of course, be a great point. The obvious place to look is at the river mouth, since Indians often named a river after a natural feature located there.²⁷ A prominent headland, the terminus of the Military Ridge, stands south of the Wisconsin River where it joins the Mississippi River.²⁸ Rugged and picturesque bluffs, some of them sheer precipices, border both rivers; but the headland at the junction, which rises more than 500 feet above the bottomlands below, surpasses them all. Tribesmen of

²⁵ Albert S. Gatschet, *MS. Vocabulary of the Peoria Language*, MS. No. 2483, Archives of the Office of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution. For the view that much of what Gatschet considered Peoria is really Miami, see Caroline Dunn, *Jacob Piatt Dunn: His Miami Language Studies and Indian Manuscript Collection*, Prehistory Research Series, Indiana Historical Society, I (Indianapolis, 1937), No. 2, pp. 37–39.

²⁶ Charles F. Voegelin, *op. cit.*, No. 8, Part 3, p. 302.

²⁷ Jedidiah Morse, *A Report to the Secretary of War of the United States on Indian Affairs* (New Haven, 1822), p. 124.

²⁸ See the Elkador (Iowa) Quadrangle of the U.S. Geological Survey; also *Among the State Parks and Forests of Wisconsin*, Publication No. 400–54, Wisconsin Conservation Department, p. 8; and Lawrence Martin, *The Physical Geography of Wisconsin* (Madison, 1932), pp. 185–189 and 205–207.

bygone days frequented this point of land and heaped upon it their mounds of earth. Marquette had noticed the bluffs (Costeaux)²⁹; La Salle was aware of the bluffs (deux costeaux) and of a rock hill south of the Wisconsin's mouth.³⁰ The region is today Wyalusing State Park. On June 17, 1923, people of the neighborhood, and some from farther away, ascended the headland in the dusk of early evening. There, overlooking the Wisconsin River, they unveiled a granite marker with the inscription, "At the foot of this eminence Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet entered the Mississippi River, June 17, 1673." It is to this same eminence or headland, so the present paper contends, that the *-cons-*, *-cous-* of Wisconsin refers.

The translation "at the great point" for *Miskonsing* (*Meskousing*) is supported by convincing linguistic, topographic, and historic evidence. Every element of the name, the adjective *mis*, the noun *kons* (*kous*), the locative suffix *-ing*, appears in several Algonquian dictionaries or word-lists and in different works on Algonquian place names. A wellknown physical feature, the most prominent headland in the whole area, stands directly south of the Wisconsin River at the confluence. This "great point" had been rounded many times by Indians from the Mississippi country going up the Wisconsin River to the village of the Mascoutens and on to Green Bay, then back again. It was also rounded by Joliet and Marquette on that historic day of June 17, 1673, when, going down the Wisconsin, they reached the junction with the Mississippi River. The exploration of the Mississippi (*Missi-ssippi* "great river") began with the rounding of *Miskous* (*Mis-kous* "great point").

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²⁹ *Jesuit Relations*, LIX, p. 106.

³⁰ Pierre Margry, *op.cit.*, II (Paris, 1877), pp. 250–251.