

Salt-Derived Place Names In The Ohio Valley

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DURING THE LATE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES settlers in the Ohio Valley found their salt supply a critical economic concern. Most pioneer farmers pursued a subsistence agriculture, but cattle-raising as a commercial endeavor was equally important. Through the sale of beef or pork, either salted or on the hoof, the western farmer obtained cash to purchase powder, iron goods, and other necessities and to pay his annual tax bill as well. Yet without adequate salt livestock could not survive on the western frontier; nor could animals deprived of the vital salt element be slaughtered, for such activity necessitated salt-curing.

After 1783 a commercial salt industry developed at many of the Valley's larger salt springs,¹ but several attempts to monopolize the salt trade in Kentucky and strict governmental control of salines in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois greatly restricted salt manufacture. Farmers forced to subsistence salt production as well as land speculators, eager for premium land prices, searched the Valley for the necessary springs from which individual families or even whole neighborhoods could produce a limited salt supply. A rich place name heritage derived from this activity.

The first settlers to utilize the Valley's salt springs were hunters for bison, deer, and elk, once attracted to the salines to lick the salt-encrusted earth, and particularly vulnerable to the well concealed rifleman. Thus salt springs were initially characterized and named for the attractive influence which they exerted over game animals. Gilbert Imlay, an early geographer of the Trans-Appalachian West,

¹ The following salines gained pre-eminence in the Ohio Valley between 1783 and 1800: Bullitt's, Mann's, Lower Blue, Big Bone, Drennon's, Ohio, and May's Licks (all in Kentucky) as well as the Muskingum Saline in Ohio and the Saltville Saline in Virginia. After 1800 the Kanawha Saline in West Virginia, the Wabash Saline in Illinois, the Scioto Saline in Ohio, and the Little Sandy and Clay County Salt Works in Kentucky came to dominate the Valley's salt industry.

wrote, "A salt spring is called a Lick, from the earth about them being furrowed out, in a most curious manner, by the buffalo and deer, which lick the earth on account of the saline particles with which it is impregnated."² This term, applied by the hunters, continued in the popular usage long after a farming population came to dominate the region.

These salt licks varied in size from marshes encompassing several acres to small incrustations measured in feet or in inches. Most frequently, however, the lick was actually a spring where saliferous brines derived from entrapped sea-water evaporated on reaching the surface to precipitate deposits of sodium chloride. The Ohio Valley was once covered by an inland sea in which sand, lime, and organic material accumulated to depths of several thousand feet. Under pressure, these buried sediments were consolidated and connate water was entrapped in the interstices between the mineral grains. From these aquifers "fossil sea water" rose (as it does today) along zones of disconformity by way of deep seated faults and fissures to the surface.³

The great majority of the Valley's salt springs were known only locally and few were ever recorded even by local antiquarians, so insignificant were their brines considered. Surviving place names such as "lick," "licking," "mahoning," "salt," and "saline" represent for many districts the only evidences of salt availability in the past. These place names, as found on the Ohio Valley's 15 minute and 7½ minute topographic quadrangles, are shown in Figure 1.⁴ At the sites indicated, salt brine was sufficiently strong to prompt salt-derived place names to the exclusion of other terms. Thus the map details the vast majority of the region's salt springs as they were discovered, named, and retained as a part of local experience and folklore.

² Gilbert Imlay, *A Topographical Description of The Western Territory of North America* (London: J. Debrett, 1792) pp. 46-47.

³ Paul H. Price, et al., "Springs Of West Virginia," *West Virginia Geological Survey*, VI, 1936, pp. 7-8; Gerald C. Gambs and George W. White, "Ohio's Mineral Resources; Salt Reserves," *Ohio State University Studies, Engineering Experiment Station Circular*, No. 49, XV, 1946, p. 4; and Wilbur Stout, et al., "Brines of Ohio," *Ohio Geological Survey Bulletin*, Series 4, No. 37, 1932, p. 15.

⁴ The author examined all 15 minute and 7½ minute topographic maps of the Ohio Valley published through August, 1966 by the U.S. Geological Survey and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

The term "lick" is the most extensively used place name of salt derivation in the Ohio Valley; yet its present usage varies somewhat from its original context. Today the term usually identifies a river or lesser hydrologic feature along which a salt lick had in the past been discovered. Since brines were usually exposed in valley bottoms, it was quite common for settlers to use individual licks in identifying adjacent streams. Thus the term usually appears as a part of a compound specific name, e.g. "Elk Lick Branch," and sometimes, but less frequently, as a pure generic term, e.g. "Elk Lick."⁵ In the latter usage "lick" appears as the equivalent of other generic place names, e.g. "branch," "creek," and "run," as these terms serve to identify water courses generally.

The place names "salt" and "saline" were usually applied to large rivers and creeks and were, therefore, less frequently employed. In addition, these place-designations enjoyed more popular usage after 1800 than before; therefore, they are relatively more common in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Tennessee, in areas opened to settlement after the turn of the century. Perhaps the term "saline" was more appropriately applied to springs utilized for commercial salt making purposes, but this generalization is not valid south of the Ohio River where even the largest salt works were more traditionally known as "licks." Indeed, even in the north the infrequent use of the place names "salt" and "saline" reflected the pervasive popularity of the older and more traditional "lick" terminology.

The terms "mahoning" and "licking" were also descriptive of the Valley's salt resource. "Mahoning," derived from the Delaware Indian word "M'hoani," signified "a salt lick."⁶ The term "licking" is also of Delaware derivation;⁷ however, it is certain that most American settlers attached this place name to the landscape not as an Indian word, but as a corruption of the term "lick." Today these designations appear infrequently in the Valley, but, since major rivers carry both place names, these terms enjoy a certain degree of

⁵ Wilbur Zelinsky, "Some Problems in the Distribution of Generic Terms in the Place-Names of the Northeastern United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, XVI, 1955, p. 324.

⁶ August C. Mahr, "Indian River and Place Names in Ohio," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, LXVI, 1957, p. 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*

notoriety. "Mahoning" appears almost exclusively in the old Delaware region of northwestern Pennsylvania and northeastern Ohio, while "licking" enjoys a somewhat broader usage in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky.

It is interesting to note that other place names may have reflected salt's availability. In Indiana, for example, the "Blue," "White," and "Whitewater" Rivers probably received their respective names as well as their distinctive coloration from dissolved saliferous material.⁸ So also were the ubiquitously distributed "White," "Paint," and "Blue" Licks appropriately named. Water courses carrying place names depicting white and blue coloration are frequently found on the Valley's topographic maps as tributary, stem, and neighboring streams to water courses carrying specific designations of salt-derivation.

Taken in the aggregate, salt-derived place names, although common throughout the Ohio Valley, appear in greater density in southern Appalachia. There structural discordance has produced a profusion of saline occurrences, and a rash of place names indicative of this salt availability has obviously resulted. Throughout the flatlands of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, where a general lack of outcropping bedrock and a preponderance of glacially-derived overburden did not foster a widespread occurrence of surface brines, such place names do not appear in great density.

Also, stream patterns in the highly dissected Appalachian Highlands are well defined on the land surface and specific place names were applied to even the smallest first-order tributaries. However, in areas of low stream density, characterized by less dissection, specific place names were not attached as conscientiously nor as systematically to the land surface. Measured in terms of human perception, drainage features may not have been as pronounced on the land surface and the need for specific place names less apparent. As a result of this less-intensive application of place names generally, salt-derived terms appear less-frequently outside the Appalachian area.

It is highly probable that the unequal distribution of salt-derived place names in the Ohio Valley was also fostered by a greater adherence to traditional place name terminology in certain areas.

⁸ David Thomas, *Travels Through the Western Country in the Summer of 1816* (Auburn, New York: David Rumsey, 1819), p. 134.

Once attached to the landscape, salt-derived place names seem to have enjoyed a sustained popularity as part of a distinct Appalachian culture. North and west of the Ohio River it is evident that many "licks," "salines," and "salt springs" lost their place name identities as the process of urbanization brought new peoples, new economies, and new settlement forms to more completely obscure the frontier culture of the early nineteenth century.

After 1840, place names reflecting salt availability were attached less frequently to the land. The stimulus to salt exploration had all but disappeared, for the Ohio Valley's economy had rapidly matured. A high quality, low cost, commercial salt product had eliminated the need for subsistence salt production and, since the woodlands and prairies had been largely converted to agriculture, the opportunities to hunt in and about the licks had declined as well. As the Ohio Valley matured, her population turned increasingly to an urbanized commercial economy; in the process an active place name tradition was lost.

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NAMES IN BRIEF: THE UNDERGROUND PRESS

As a sub-culture of today's youth scene, the hippy movement has come into sharp focus in its having had significant effect on numerous quarters of contemporary society. Variouslly termed the psychedelic revolution, the hallucination aggregation, the flower children, etc., the movement offers a particular social system and diversified culture to its members.¹ Among the creative art forms of this culture are its newsletter and newspaper publications which together comprise the Underground Press. With distribution in major American, British, and Canadian cities, this international syndicate affects readers of the following publications whose name content varies from provocation to peace.²

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¹ J. L. Simmons and B. Winograd, *It's Happening*. Santa Barbara, California, Marc-Laird Publications, 1967.

² Underground publications index. *Oracle of Southern California*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 1, (Mar.) 1967.