Naming Michigan's Counties

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CERTAIN KINDS OF PLACE-NAMES are bestowed individually; others are given in groups. Generally the naming of a settlement, a river, a peak or mountain is a singular act, done by and for itself with little reference to others. At the opposite pole, when a city subdivision is laid out, a whole cluster of streets are likely to be named at the same time, memorializing almost anything or anyone from presidents of the country to the titles of Sir Walter Scott's novels. The street names of the colonies of Mexico City are an excellent illustration of the latter tendency.

In the 50 states of the union, the naming of counties may reflect either one of these processes, depending upon the conditions of settlement and consolidation. It is the purpose of this paper to survey the naming of the counties of a single state, namely Michigan, in terms of the bipolarity which has been mentioned. At the present time the state has 83 counties. The process of naming them began as early as 1815; for reasons to be given later, one might possibly say 1796. But even 1815 represents a date 22 years prior to the attainment of statehood. The last county to be established was Dickinson, in 1891. Thus the naming process covered a minimum span of 76 years. Moreover, it included much more than devising and bestowing the current 83 names. Actually some 35 more are involved, making a total of 118.

In what is now the state of Michigan, the first county to have been organized and named was Wayne. It was established in 1815 by Lewis Cass, who was at that time Governor of Michigan Territory. The source of the name is clear: General Anthony Wayne, Revolutionary hero, who in 1794 had assured American control of Detroit and the surrounding area. But in a sense the name was not Cass's creation. On August 18, 1796 Winthrop Sargent, Acting Governor of the Northwest Territory, had set apart a county which he called Wayne, extending westward from the Cuyahoga River to what is now the dividing line between Indiana and Illinois, and northward to the Canadian border. Thus it included all of the subsequent Territory of Michigan and parts of Ohio and Indiana. The county seat, then as later, was Detroit.

When in 1805 the Northwest Territory ceased to be a single entity and was broken up into component parts which shifted considerably in size and name, Wayne County ceased to be an operative unit. Under General William Hull, its first governor, Michigan Territory was divided into a number of districts. When Cass succeeded him, he undertook the

process of county organization. Beginning in 1815 with the Detroit area, he revived the name Wayne, which had been bestowed 19 years earlier.

The tradition of personal commemoration continued with the naming and establishment of Monroe County in 1817 and Macomb a year later. President Monroe had paid a five-day visit to Michigan Territory in 1817. The record is not clear whether the county was named in advance of his coming or just after his departure. Alexander Macomb, born in the territory, and eventually to become the highest ranking general in the army, was stationed in Detroit, in command of the Fifth Military District, from 1815 to 1821. Thus, all three of the counties named so far reflect immediate commemoration, honoring figures alive and present.

Oakland, the fourth county to be named by Cass in 1819, furnishes the first instance of topographical description. At that time much of southern Michigan consisted of stretches of open land with a few scattered oaks growing on them. They were called *oak openings*, "so characteristic of Michigan scenery," as Charles Fenno Hoffman remarked. With the establishment of these four counties, the southeastern corner of the state was organized. In the naming of St. Clair County in 1820, slightly to the north, Cass returned to the practice of personal commemoration, although there is some question about the identity of the individual who was so honored. In the light of Cass's naming practices as evidenced up to this point, the most likely candidate is General Arthur St. Clair, the first governor of Northwest Territory, whose term covered the years 1787-1802, and who had died in 1818.

Up to this point the organization as well as the naming of the counties had proceeded on a one-by-one basis. But the population of the territory was increasing, spreading beyond the original core of settlements in all directions in a fairly even fashion. The year 1822 provides the first instance of a practice which was to be followed on at least three more occasions within the next two decades, that of multiple or bloc authorization and naming. At this time Governor Cass authorized the organization of and personally named six counties, which formed a ring around the original nucleus of five. They were Lenawee, Lapeer, Saginaw, Sanilac, Shiawassee, and Washtenaw.

The contrast between these six new names and the five which had preceded them is immediately evident. The earlier ring of brevity and immediate familiarity was replaced by melodies which were or appeared to be of Indian origin. Prior to this Cass had recognized an Indian name only by his establishment of Mackinac County in 1818, as a kind of catchall to cover the entire Northern Peninsula. This was the first year that Wisconsin had been constituted a part of Michigan Territory, and the Northern Peninsula was thought of primarily as Wisconsin land, at least at that time. Yet Mackinac in a sense reflects *de facto* recognition or extension rather than name giving, since the island at the confluence of

Lakes Huron and Michigan and the fortress on it had borne the name even before the British had wrested it from the French.

Of the six new names, only one referred to a person. Sanilac was a Wyandotte chief who had warred with the Iroquois. Like Mackinac, three of the names, Saginaw, Shiawassee, and Washtenaw, were descriptive of the topography, referring especially to the rivers. The name Lapeer illustrates a process frequently in evidence with Michigan names: an English adaptation of a French translation of an original Indian word. When the French encountered the Ojibway name *Pewanagowing*, "river of flint stones," they translated it to La Pierre, and it was the English approximation of this which accounts for the county name, although the principal settlement along the river bank came to be called Flint.

The year 1826 saw the establishment of a single county, Chippewa, carved out of the Mackinac County territory, but three points about the name and naming process are noteworthy. Although the name is Indian, it is commemorative rather than descriptive, but honoring a tribe or nation rather than a person. The name was given not by Governor Cass but by the territorial Legislative Council, which had been established by act of Congress in 1823. The Council had requested Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, erstwhile Indian Agent on Mackinac Island, explorer, geologist, ethnologist, and linguist, to submit one or more names to it. He responded with three suggestions: Algonac, Allegan, and Chippewa. The Council selected the third of these, but the other two eventually became county names as well.

County naming proceeded in 1829 with another burst, and again it was the Legislative Council and not the governor that supplied the names. At this point 12 counties were organized; they filled in a three-tiered bank extending across the entire southern quarter of the Lower Peninsula. But this time the Council looked not to Indian lore but rather to political reality as a naming source. Eight of the counties in this group bore the name of the president of the country, Andrew Jackson, the vice president, John Calhoun, and of the heads of the executive branches of the federal government. They are referred to at times as the Cabinet Counties. The cabinet members so memorialized were Martin Van Buren, Secretary of State, Samuel D. Ingham, Secretary of the Treasury, John H. Eaton, Secretary of War, John Branch, Secretary of the Navy, John M. Berrien, Attorney General, and William T. Barry, Postmaster General.

Of the remaining four counties one was named Cass—prophetically it would seem, since he was later to become a member of Jackson's cabinet as well. At this time, however, he was still serving as governor of the territory, another example of instant commemoration. The name Hillsdale was undoubtedly suggested by the topography of the area. Kalamazoo

was the one Indian name which surfaced at this time; its meaning has been variously interpreted, from "stones like otters" to "boiling kettle," but since our primary interest is in process, this need not concern us here.* St. Joseph County, like Mackinac, represented the application of an already existing name to the newly-organized governmental unit. The river which coursed through the county had borne the name of the patron saint of New France ever since 1689, when it had been changed from Riviere des Miamis, given to it ten years earlier by La Salle.

Two years later, in 1831, the Legislative Council again busied itself with the establishment of another dozen counties, constituting a second three-tiered group across the entire peninsula and pushing the organized portion of the state somewhere near the halfway point. It is difficult, however, to draw any generalizations about the names conferred at this time. There are three Indian names. One of them, Ottawa, commemorates a tribe. The other two, Allegan and Arenac, had been suggested five years earlier by Schoolcraft, as alternatives for Chippewa. Allegan is also a tribal name, for one of the five Iroquois nations—the first Indian name with no visible Michigan connection. Arenac is unquestionably the strangest concoction encountered thus far, a hybrid combining *arena*, Latin for "sand," with *-ac,* an Ojibwa locative suffix.

Of the remaining nine, six are personal names, but they take two new turns. Two are foreign: Montcalm, the gallant loser on the Plains of Abraham, and Isabella, proposed by Schoolcraft in honor of the Queen of Spain and not, as has been suggested, named for the first white child born in the county, an event which did not occur until 1855. The four other names are Anglo-American. Chancellor James Kent of New York, author of an authoritative volume of legal commentaries, was then at the height of his career and reputation. De Witt Clinton, already dead for three years, was honored for his efforts on behalf of the Erie Canal; his name had already been given to a township and a river. These two choices are not especially surprising, especially in view of the heavy influx of settlers from New York State, but the two others are. Major Henry Gladwin had been commandant of the Detroit garrison during the wars with Pontiac, but during the Revolution he had served with distinction on the British side. Charles Gratiot was an army captain and engineer who in 1814 had built a fort at the head of the St. Clair River. At the time that the county was named, he held the post of Inspector for West Point. In 1838 he was to be dismissed from the service for failing to

* It must be recognized that in many instances there is less than complete agreement on the original form and often the meaning, especially of names derived from the American Indian Languages. However, the primary focus of this paper is upon the total process of naming rather than the sources of individual names. For this reason, it has seemed reasonable to accept in general the conclusions reported by William H. Jenks in his article "The History and Meaning of the County Names of Michigan," *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 38 (1926), 939-78.

account properly for public funds in his hands, but there seems not to have been any visible movement to rename the county as a consequence.

Of this group, three names remain to be accounted for. Midland is truly descriptive, since it is close to the geographical center of the Lower Peninsula. Oceana is fancifully so; it does border on Lake Michigan. Ionia is unquestionably a by-product of the classical revival movement which was then sweeping the state. This was reflected elsewhere in town names (Sparta, Ithaca, Romulus), but not in any other county names.

With respect to the entire group of 12, two tendencies may be observed. Personal commemoration reaches farther back and farther afield. With names like Clinton and Kent there is for the first time unmistakable evidence of the strong New York State background of the early settlers. The next two counties to be named again testify to this influence. Edward Livingston, originally a New Yorker though he subsequently moved to New Orleans, had succeeded Martin Van Buren as Secretary of State and was later to become minister to France. Livingston County was organized in 1833. In 1835 it was proposed to form a new county from parts of Saginaw, Lapeer, and Shiawassee counties, and the legislative bill establishing it proposed the name Grand Blanc. However, this French importation failed to impress the New Yorkers in the area, who demanded that it be named Genesee, after one of the counties in their home state.

These were the last counties to be named by the Legislative Council. In 1837 Michigan became a state, its admission delayed for some two years by the boundary dispute with Ohio and punctuated by the comic-opera Toledo War, with its casualty list of one horse. Even before this, Indian titles to the remaining Lower Peninsula lands had been extinguished by the Treaty of 1836, and within a year or two the initial survey of the lands had been completed. In 1839 Douglass Houghton, in the process of organizing a geological survey, recommended to the new state legislature that the remaining upper half of the Lower Peninsula be organized into counties. In January of 1838 Henry Rowe Schoolcraft had sent a memorandum to Governor Mason, suggesting ways in which various linguistic elements might be combined in the creation of new names. Mason had sent this on to the legislature. With Houghton's suggestion and Schoolcraft's memorandum before it, the legislature requested Schoolcraft to supply a list of names for the new counties that were to be authorized. Schoolcraft complied and in 1840 provided a list of 29 names. They were: Aishcum, Anamickee, Cheboygan, Cheonoquet, Huron, Kanotin, Kautawabet, Kaykakee, Keshkauko, Leelanau, Manistee, Mecosta, Meegisee, Mikenauk, Missaukee, Negwegon, Newaygo, Notipekago, Ogemaw, Okkudda, Omeena, Oscoda, Presque Isle, Shawono, Tonedagana, Tuscola, Unwattin, Wabassee, and Wyandotte, a number sufficient to accommodate five additional hori-

zontal tiers of counties, to a total of 11.

Except for the last of these names, the counties for which they were planned were all eventually organized, but not immediately. There was never a Wyandotte County; the territory it was supposed to embrace was combined with Cheboygan, and the county was organized in 1855. But the list has two striking features. With one exception, Presque Isle, which is clearly French, the names all have the appearance, at least, of being Indian in origin. Presque Isle, "nearly an island," is of course a descriptive term, referring to a narrow peninsula jutting out into Lake Huron. Schoolcraft, in his travel account of 1820, had commented that by portaging 200 yards, he had saved a distance of six to eight miles.

Aside from the Indian appearance of most of the names, it is also evident to anyone familiar with the names of Michigan counties today that more than half of the 29 are not in current use. This will be explained in due course, but first an examination of all the names which were proposed is in order. Included among the 28 apparently of Indian origin were two tribal names, Wyandotte and Huron. Although the latter was a term applied to an Indian tribe, it was actually French, referring to a hair style which gave the warriors the appearance of bears, "hures." Of the remaining 26, all but eight were names of chiefs, either signers of various treaties concluded between 1807 and 1837, of which there were a half-dozen or more, or those who had at one time or another been valued allies of the Americans. It is scarcely necessary to identify each one of them individually. Typical of the first group is Cheonoquet, a Chippewa who signed the treaties of 1807, 1815, 1825, and 1837. Characteristic of the second is Negwegon, also a Chippewa, who had been helpful to the American cause during the War of 1812. Inclusion in the list did not necessarily signify moral virtue. Keshkauko, although a prominent figure in the negotiations leading to the treaty of 1819, was characterized by Schoolcraft in his memoirs as "a perfect dictator." In 1826 he was tried at Detroit and convicted as being accessory to the murder of another Indian. He then took poison conveyed to him by his wife.

Schoolcraft appears to have tried to secure equality of representation from the various tribes in the state. Although the names mentioned up to this point have all been Chippewa, others were Ottawa, such as Kanotin and Tonedagana, and Mecosta and Wabassee belonged to the Pottawatomi tribe. It must also be recognized that although these were the names of persons, most of them were translatable into expressions either personally descriptive or suggesting some trait of character. For example, according to Schoolcraft, Cheonoquet meant "lowering cloud," Meegisee was "the eagle," and Kautawabet was translated as *Breche* or "broken tooth."

In general the eight remaining terms referred to the topography, and for the most part, their precise meaning is not very clear. Manistee has

been variously interpreted as "spirit of the woods," "river with islands," and "river with white woods [presumably birches] and red clay powder." In view of the fact that an eighteenth-century English map applies the name Red Clay River to the stream usually identified as the Manistique, the last interpretation may well be the correct one. Notipekago was the Indian word for the Marquette River and has been translated as "river with heads on sticks," referring to the gruesome postbellum decorative scheme characteristic of the time. For the most part the names cited thus far appear to have been direct borrowings, however much the phonology may have been altered in the borrowing process. But Schoolcraft was not above manipulating word elements. Oscoda, for example, is a portmanteau coinage of *ossin* "pebble" and *muscoda* "prairie." Similarly, Tuscola is a blend of *dusinagan* "level" and *cola* "lands." It was undoubtedly this kind of practice he had in mind when he addressed his 1838 memorandum to Governor Mason.

It should be recognized that when the legislature authorized the establishment of a county, set its boundaries, and decided upon a name for it, this did not necessarily mean immediate organization of the unit. Some of the counties authorized in 1840 were not organized, in the sense of setting up a governmental mechanism, until some ten or 15 years later. We have already seen that Wyandotte County was legislated out of existence before it ever became a reality.

This point is important here because in the interval between 1840 and 1843 a number of Michigan legislators apparently began to have second thoughts about certain of the county names they had so readily accepted. As a consequence, in the 1843 session of the legislature, 17 of 29 names adopted in 1840 were rejected and replaced by others. Among the new names there is one immediately recognizable group, consisting of Antrim, Claire, Roscommon, Wexford, and Emmet Counties. Four of these are the names of counties in Ireland, and the fifth that of an Irish patriot. They replaced the names Mikenauk, Keshkauko, Missaukee, Kautawabet, and Tonedagana respectively. Credit for this is usually assigned to one Charles O'Malley, a legislator from Mackinac.

The remaining 12 substitutions demonstrate no particular pattern. Four of the new names are personally commemorative, although in two instances, Crawford and Montmorency, the identity of the persons thus honored is not wholly clear. There is no question, however, about Charlevoix, the explorer, or about the first governor of Michigan, Stevens Thomson Mason, who had died in January of that year. Osceola was a Seminole chief who had no connection with the state, but it may well be that his imprisonment during the later years of his life created some public sympathy for him. Otsego was a New York county name, and like Genesee before it, owed its adoption to the large number of New Yorkers in the state. Two or possibly three of the new names were in-

tended to be topographically descriptive, although it must be conceded that there are very few lakes in Lake County. Grand Traverse "long crossing" was an adoption of the French term which had long been applied to the bay. Kalkaska has been identified, but not indisputably, as Chippewa "burned over" and may well be a Schoolcraft coinage.

Strange as it may seem, in the light of this wholesale rejection of Schoolcraft's earlier suggestions, three of the new names, Alcona, Alpena, and Iosco, are definitely traceable to him. Of these, the first two strangely enough represent blends of Arabic morphemes. Iosco, the third, was a combination of Indian elements. The name had long been a favorite with him; it was the title both of a poem that he had written and of one of the tales in his *Algic Researches.* That there was nothing violently personal in this legislative rejection of Schoolcraft's names is also indicated by the fact that in that very same year, as the legislature set about the task of designating the counties of the Upper Peninsula, one of them was named for him.

The only clue to the objections that the members of the legislature must have felt is to be found in the fact that no county name containing more than three syllables survived the onslaught, and that of the substituted county names, only Montmorency had more than three. Beyond this one can only note that a preponderance of [k] sounds, as in Kaykakee or Keshkauko, seemed to mark a name for extinction, but even so it is difficult to understand why the name Kalkaska should have been considered preferable to Wabassee, which it replaced.

In general the wholesale revision of 1843, with a few isolated exceptions, completed the task of supplying names for the counties of the Lower Peninsula, and even in that year the attention of the legislature began to turn northward. The naming of Schoolcraft County has already been mentioned. Three others were named at the same time. Marquette was again commemorative. Ontonagon was named for the river which flowed through the area. It had been so named on Jesuit maps as early as 1670, apparently an Indian term for "hunting river" or "fishing place." Delta County, which originally included parts of Menominee, Dickinson, Marquette, and Iron Counties was so named because of its triangular shape, though inverse. Two years later Houghton County was named, in honor of Douglass Houghton who had been in charge of the state geologic survey, again almost immediately after his tragic drowning in Lake Superior.

The year 1843 marked the end of naming on the wholesale plan. For one thing, the entire state was now well provided for with respect to both names and coverage of the area, even though in some instances actual county organization was a matter for the future. From that year on, no single legislature authorized the establishment of more than two counties. Moreover, the new ones that were established consisted for the

most part of areas carved out of existing counties. There is little in the naming process that has not been previously encountered. Keweenaw (1861), Menominee (1861), and Gogebec (1874) in the Upper Peninsula, and Muskegon (1859) in the Lower are clearly of Indian origin, and all bear some relationship to the land or landscape, as do Bay (1858) and Iron (1885).

The remaining names are commemorative. Baraga (1875) was named in honor of Bishop Frederick Baraga, a Slovenian missionary to the Indians who had written a Chippewa grammar and dictionary, and who was also recently deceased. The names Alger (1885) and Luce (1887) honored governors of the state, each name being authorized at the time of incumbency in office. The last county to be named, Dickinson (1891), repeats in a small way the Cabinet Counties episode. It was named by one of Michigan's few Democratic legislatures of the post-Civil War period in honor of Donald M. Dickinson, Postmaster General in President Cleveland's first cabinet. In a sense this may be looked upon as a political riposte to recent naming of Alger and Luce, both Republicans, but in justice it should be said that not only had Dickinson been a Michigan resident from early boyhood on, but he is characterized in the *Dictionary of American Biography* as "the second Michigan Democrat to rise to a position of political prominence," the first, of course, having been Lewis Cass.

A few names which were once authorized but no longer in use are also of interest for what they reveal about the naming process. We have already seen that Grand Blanc had no appeal to the New Yorkers in the area, who insisted upon the change to Genesee. Equally fruitless was the attempt in 1861 to gain acceptance of the name Bleeker for what two years later was renamed Menominee County. Bleeker was the family name of the wife of Anson Bangs, one of the early settlers in the area. The proposal apparently pleased the Bangs family but no one else. The settlers simply refused to organize until a different name was adopted. The climate seemed to be hospitable to the names of explorers, political figures on the state and national scene, and even in a few instances to scholars, but not to purely local luminaries.

A few counties which were once in existence have been disestablished. Isle Royale was made an independent county in 1875 but was then attached to Keweenaw in 1891. In 1855 a legislative committee proposed the name Beaver for a county which would have comprised Beaver, Fox, and Manitou Islands in Lake Michigan. At that time Beaver Island was a Mormon settlement, a kingdom in fact, ruled by James Strang who had assumed the title of King James. Strang was then also a member of the Michigan legislature. For reasons not at all apparent he opposed the suggestion and successfully promoted the substitution of Manitou for it. The county was disestablished in 1895. Beaver Island was attached to

Charlevoix County, Manitou and Fox Islands to Leelanau. Since that time there has been no further tinkering with county names or boundaries.

Throughout the period of county naming there were two attempts to fasten upon the name of Washington; neither met with success. In 1867 the legislature voted to establish a Washington County in the Upper Peninsula, but the state Supreme Court ruled against the legislature and annulled the act. Much earlier than this a petition to substitute the name Washington for Hillsdale was sent to the territorial Legislative Council, but there was no response to it. As a consequence the only Michigan counties bearing the names of presidents of the country are Monroe, Jackson, and Van Buren, a striking contrast to most of the neighboring states. Van Buren had been named, of course, prior to his election to the presidency. Notable also is the lack of any evidence of an attempt to name a county for Abraham Lincoln, despite the strong Republican leanings of the state during the post-Civil War period.

Unquestionably the most interesting aspect of the county naming process, about a century in duration, was the shift from individual to bloc naming, with the groups increasing in size until they reached their peak in 1840 and then slowly returning to individual naming at the end. Geographically, for the Lower Peninsula at least, the naming begins with an original core in one corner of the area, then a periphery about it in semicircular shape, then proceeds northward in lateral tiers across the state. The wholesale rejection in 1843 of an entire bevy of names is undoubtedly a unique occurrence. Commemorative names far outnumber any other kind, and again with a preponderance of names of the living or recently deceased. For the most part, both English and American Indian names reflect individuals to whom the state is indebted, scholar and scientist as well as military leader and statesman, treaty-maker as well as general.

The political motivation behind the Cabinet Counties probably lacks a precise counterpart elsewhere, and this is equally true of Schoolcraft's coinages, both Indian and Arabic. French influence is less evident in the names of counties than in the names of streams. The transporting of American place-names from the previous home territory of early settlers is confined to two from New York and four from Ireland. What this suggests is the usefulness of looking at the full panoply of county names from a single state when attempting to identify the prevailing patterns. Certainly those which have been discerned in this study would scarcely be capable of duplication elsewhere, leading one to conclude that each of the 50 states may reflect a combination of processes equally interesting.

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