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# Hail Fredonia, Pinch Gut, and Minerva! Place Names in New York State

BY DAN BERGGREN

“Folk Roots” was the name of a freshman seminar I taught at State University of New York, Fredonia. The first assignment: tell the story of your given name and why your parents chose it. A few already knew, but many had to phone home to find out. Everyone was excited to share their personal folklore the next time we met—from the proud young woman who was the seventh Emma in her family to the embarrassed 20-year-old who discovered he was named after his mother’s favorite soap opera character.

## Naming and Changing Names

The places we live also have tales to tell. I was born in Brooklyn, what the Dutch called “broken land.” Head north up the Hudson River Valley, past the city of Hudson, both named for the English explorer who claimed the territory for the Dutch, and you arrive at the state capital. Due to the beaver fur trade, people settled around Fort Orange and called that village Beverwijck. The English renamed it in 1664. My storyteller friend Joe Doolittle tells the tale:

When the English took over the colony, they had to change all the names. King Charles named his newfound colony after his brother the Duke of York, who was also Duke of Albany, a town near York in northern England. In the old Latin-Norman-French, Alba is white and nee is to be born, so if you were from Alba-nee, you were born in the white place, which was Scotland where it snowed more than it did in the midlands.

## Greco-Roman Names

I was raised in a town named for the Greek goddess of wisdom, Minerva. Each part of that township has a name rich in stories: Irishtown, where immigrants settled during the potato famine; the West Side, not only the western portion of town

but, more importantly, where the West family lived; Olmstedville, where Levi, Sanford and Aaron Olmstead had a tannery; and Leonardsville, where David Leonard had a sawmill on Trout Brook. This last section of town, where my family lived, bears the nickname Pinch Gut. As the old-timers used to say, Mr. Leonard didn’t feed his workmen that well, so they were always hungry, cinching their belts tighter, hence pinching their gut.

Pinch Gut is certainly more colorfully named than the classically named town it’s in. There’s a great number of Greco-Roman names across the state. Rome, Utica, Syracuse, Ithaca, and dozens of others are in an area once called The Military Tract—land promised to Revolutionary War veterans for their service. George R. Stewart tells about the naming of townships in his book *Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States* (New York: Random House, 1945). Rather than being associated with emigrants’ homes, these Greco-Roman names were ones intended for the new citizens to live up to. The New York State Land Office dispersed land in the Military Tract, and the naming job fell to its secretary, Robert Harpur.

## Missing Names

Sometimes a name doesn’t stick, and it is replaced or forgotten. Hanging on my wall is an 1890 Map of the Great Forest of Northern New York. On it are fascinating names proposed for townships on the western edge of the then proposed Adirondack Park: Unanimity, Frugality, Perseverance, Sobriety, Enterprise, Industry, and Regularity. The only remnant left in the spirit of these is a river called Independence.

## Drop the H

Our state has a number of *burgs* (the German word for castle, which came to mean the city that grew up around the fortress)

and *burghs* (the Scottish word for town or borough): Newburgh, Duaneburg, Edinburg, Lansingburgh, Warrensburg, Ellenburg, Whallonsburg, and Plattsburgh. In 1891, government bureaucracy flexed its muscle in the form of the United States Board on Geographic Names (First Report of the United States Board on Geographic Names. 1890–1891, U. S. Govt. Print. Off., 1892). One of its 13 general principles for standardizing place names was to drop the final *-b* in place names ending in *-burgh*. Some towns petitioned successfully and kept their final *-bs*.

## On the Frontier

Before moving to Western New York, my image of Buffalo was the large animal that is an athletic team logo, the bison. Not long after arriving, I heard the story of how Buffalo, formerly Buffalo Creek, was named for the beautiful river, or as the French settlers said, *beau fleuve*. My family and I lived in Fredonia, and my only prior reference for that name was the 1933 movie *Duck Soup* in which Groucho Marx was dictator of the mythical kingdom of Fredonia. While doing volunteer work on the restoration of the 1891 Fredonia Opera House, I heard stories about the Marx Brothers playing that stage in their vaudeville days. However, Rick Davis, current director of the Opera House, says there’s no documentation that this ever really happened. Maybe the four other cities across the country named Fredonia have their own version of the same story. According to Rick:

Fredonia Mayor Harry Hickey protested the film’s release in a letter to the studio, claiming that it tarnished the fine name of Fredonia and asked that the name in the movie be changed. The Marx Brothers wrote the mayor back and suggested, among other things, that he change the name of the town!

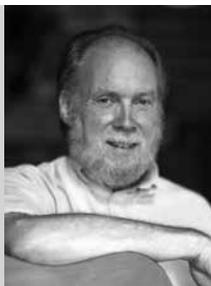
Whether or not this was part of a planned publicity stunt is still debated.

While thinking about the Marx Brothers' connection, I was reminded of another Fredonia story: that Fredonia was once in consideration for the naming of our nation, instead of honoring the 15th-century Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci. According to a 2015 blog post, "The United States of Fredonia," by Mark Boonshoft, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library:

"It was a great oversight" of the Constitution's framers that they did not give the United States a "proper name." So claimed Samuel Latham Mitchill in an 1803 broadside. A doctor by training, Mitchill not only diagnosed this problem, he also proposed a remedy. The land occupied by the United States, he suggested, should be called Fredon, or Fredonia in its more "poetical" form. ([www.nypl.org/blog/2015/11/12/united-states-fredonia](http://www.nypl.org/blog/2015/11/12/united-states-fredonia))

Apparently Dr. Mitchill's suggestion was simply too late. We all know how hard it is to change once something or someone is named. Besides, the Marx Brothers would've had to invent some other mythical kingdom. ▼

Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the US and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit [www.berggrenfolk.com](http://www.berggrenfolk.com) to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.



# A People Who Live by the Word

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

"My village of Dankawali is about the same size as Jackson Heights," Kewulay told me as we walked along Roosevelt Avenue in Queens, with the elevated subway roaring overhead. "But quiet, the only sounds we have in Dankawali are crickets and frogs, a whole symphony of frogs." Kewulay is my "friend and close associate," as we respectfully (and jokingly) refer to one another. For more than a decade, we worked together on the documentary *In Search of Finah Misa Kule*.

Directed by Kewulay Kamara, founding director of the nonprofit cultural center Bad-enya, the documentary chronicles Kewulay's quest to reconstitute an ancient epic handed down in his family. When he was a boy of 14 in the village of Dankawali in northeast Sierra Leone, Kewulay watched his father, a member of the Finah clan of oral poets and masters of ceremony, writing down the ancient stories in the Kuranko language, in an Arabic script on an animal skin with a reed pen. His father was concerned that his children would no longer continue to pass the stories down in the oral tradition. Kewulay tells of his decision to leave the manuscript in the village as an heirloom after he immigrated to the US. He then tells of the breakout of the Civil War in Sierra Leone and his journey back to his home, only to discover that the manuscript was destroyed when the village was razed. "A thousand years of history lay in ashes," he says.

Kewulay's son, Kalie, is a Queens-based rapper who is reading the dictionary to improve his raps ("I just reached the word 'loaf' in the L's," he told me.) In the film he talks about how he is "holding down 718," his area code. In the documentary, Kewulay returns with his son Kalie to Dankawali to collect and retell the ancient stories, using cameras and computers rather than a reed pen. I was so pleased to travel with them to the village to meet this sweet clan of elders for whom "humility is nobility." Practicing, good-hearted Muslims who live in peace with the

neighboring Christian populations, his brothers and cousins do not drink, but Kewulay and I did spend a magical evening telling each other stories of our very different lives in a bar set up in a veranda in downtown Kabala, the larger town where Kewulay went to school.

Kewulay's family mythology is of a people who live by the word. "A person who cannot bear to hear," he told me, "will have nothing of value said in their presence." "Words do not rust, words do not rot." His stories come from a time "when what was said was done, and what was done was said." As his cousin Momory Kamara put it,

You are not a Finah because you lie  
You are not a Finah because you slash  
You are not a Finah because you kill  
You are a Finah because  
When the people want a word said  
But the word is hard to say  
Finah, say it!  
The people say.

And the Finah says it. "Each word that a Finah utters," Kewulay says as the film opens, "has his life in them. Each word that the Finah utters is beyond poetry, is beyond history. It's an instrument that can create the whole world." As the film closes, he says, "We live by the wisdom in these stories."

Kewulay brings the humility and the gift for words of the Finah clan of poets to bear on his life in Jackson Heights, Queens, both as a teacher and organizer of *baro* gatherings and Kwanzaa celebrations. He also teaches young people to write praise poems. "If I tell you that my name is Kewulay, that might not mean a lot to you. But if I tell you that I am the son of Kamara and Mara, and I come from the village of Dankawali at the foothills of the great Loma mountains near the mouth of the River Niger, that starts to mean something. All of a sudden I am part of something much greater. A child to be praised may be just a little boy—but pointing

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