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Native Tongue: If Maps Could Talk

BY DAN BERGGREN

Previously, I explored stories of place names throughout our state here. Since so many towns, rivers, and mountains have names of Native American origin, they need their own column, and since this is a folklore journal, I'll begin with a tale.

Oh, Those O-Names

Traveling across the state, I often notice an interesting name and seek out a local to tell me about it. In Binghamton, I got into a conversation with an elderly gentleman about nearby Owego, so similar to Oswego, Owasco, Otsego, and Otisco. He told me a story that went something like this:

When white explorers would come into a new area, they'd ask the Native population: what do you call this place? The answer would always be the same. All of these O-words were simply variations on the Native word for "camp" or "my home." It's like pointing to a Dodge, a Ford, or a Buick and asking the owner: what do you call it? I call it my car.

Up and Down the Hudson

The Hudson River was named for Henry Hudson, the British explorer who worked for the Dutch. My filmmaker friend Patricia Lane, producing a project about the river, told me that long before the explorer sailed upstream, the Algonquin people called it Mohicanichtuck, meaning *great water in constant motion* or *river that flows two ways*. From New York harbor to Troy, this tidal estuary feels the ocean's pulse.

Not far from the Hudson's entrance into the Atlantic, there's a section of Brooklyn called Canarsie. That was the Lenape word for *fenced-in land*—where the Dutch grew tobacco, corn, and beans. Eventually, the original name Flatlands was changed to Canarsie in honor of the Native people. My dad grew up in nearby Flatbush and was familiar with a figure of speech not used much anymore. Whenever someone arrived at a place (or a point in a conversation) in a roundabout way, it was said they came "by

way of Canarsie." A couple of other Lenape words are Susquehanna, which means *oyster river*, and Lackawanna, *stream that forks*. The Scranton brothers, who mined coal and iron in Pennsylvania's Lackawanna Valley, established the Buffalo steel plant in 1902, and named the suburb Lackawanna. I came by way of Canarsie to share that with you.

Beyond the pines or *place of the portage* is what the Mohawk called Schenectady. Storyteller Joe Doolittle says, "If you're traveling down the Mohawk River from the West, it was where you could park your canoe and have the shortest walk overland through the pines to the Hudson River. . . .critical to early trade because the Mohawk River that flows through the mountains is the route west people could travel the easiest." Nearby Niskayuna means *extensive corn flats*; and Canajoharie means *pot that washes itself* or *washed kettle*, referring to a circular gorge in the Canajoharie Creek.

The territory of the Mohawk nation named Akwesasne is spread out on both the Canadian and American sides of the St. Lawrence River. A common translation for Akwesasne is *land where the partridge drums* because of the wildlife in that territory. Kay Olin, a Native storyteller, says it also refers to the sound of the rapids in the distant St. Lawrence. If the rapids sound like drumming, there's no reason the name can't mean both.

If you climb New York's highest peak, you'll see a plaque on top that reads in part:

1837 – MARCY – 1937
ALSO KNOWN BY THE INDIAN
NAME TAHAWUS MEANING
CLOUD-SPLITTER

Tahawus, or *that which cleaves the sky*, carries the literal meaning of mountain, and the figurative—truth (nothing is higher or greater). In 1994, I wrote a song about truth; the chorus goes:

Tahawus, that's what the Natives called it.
Tahawus, the highest of the high.
A mountain that could split the clouds,
the wind, the rain, and time
And rise above the timberline.

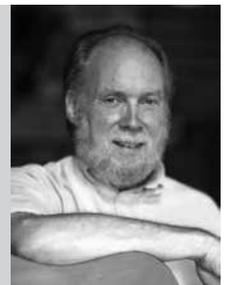
The writer Charles Fenno Hoffman, taken with the beauty of the Seneca language, thought the highest mountain should be named Tahawus, even though the word was not native to northern New York. By the time he suggested it, the mountain was already named in honor of then Governor Learned Marcy. While the mountain's official name stuck, a small mining town was named Tahawus, and over its lifetime has also carried the alternate names of MacIntyre, for the mine's owner, and Adirondac, a Native word for *one who eats trees* or a *bark eater*.

A Few Short Stories

The river and the mountain range Allegheny (also Alleghany and Allegany) is a Lenape word, usually translated as *fine river*. The town, county, and famous institution called Chautauqua are named after the local lake shaped like *a bag tied in the middle* or *two moccasins tied together*. Onchiota, near Rainbow Lake in Franklin County, means *there is a rainbow*. Ticonderoga is *at the junction of two waterways*—Lake George and Lake Champlain. Long Island's Yaphank was originally called Millville, but was renamed after the Native word for *bank of a river*, because 13 other New York State towns were named Millville.

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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 to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.

From the Director (continued)

traditional arts. In its 35-year history, the program has celebrated individuals who exemplify excellence in their chosen art form and have generously shared and nurtured traditional arts activities with others. The NEA website states that the fellowships honor “lifetime achievement, artistic excellence, and contributions to the nation’s traditional arts heritage” <<https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage>>. There have been 413 honorees since the National Heritage Fellowship program began in 1982, recognizing excellence in artistry for music, dance, craft traditions, and folk arts advocacy and service. Honorees include Syracuse guitarist and songwriter Elizabeth Cotton (Onondaga); Klezmer clarinetist Andy Statman (Brooklyn); Ghanaian drummer Yacub Addy (Albany); Lindy Hopper Frankie Manning (Queens); Puerto Rican lace maker Rosa Elena Egipciano (New York); and gospel musician, in the Sacred Steel tradition, Chuck Campbell (Monroe). The nation’s highest honor for folk and traditional artists, this award recognizes the diversity that is at the core of America’s strength.

I am convinced that Americans *do care* about the creative life of America. I urge you to contact your Congressperson today. Ask them to support the NEA and NEH. Their loss will be a loss for America’s cultural heritage and the elimination of a strong economic driver in our communities.

Ellen McHale, PhD, Executive Director
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Upstate (continued)

Back to the “O” Names . . .

A geographic investigation disavows the folk tale at the start of the column: Owego means *where the valley widens*, Oswego, *mouth of a river* or *pouring out place*; Otisco Lake may have been named *rising to the surface and again sinking*, referring to a legend of a drowning man, and Owasco Lake, *bridge on the water*. Finally, Otsego is either *bodies of water* or *place where meetings are held*, depending on who you ask. Either is preferable to the town’s earliest name Okkudo, for *sickly* or *stomach pain*. The town requested a name change; in 1843, the New York State Legislature changed it to Otsego. ▼

Submission Guidelines for *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*

Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore is a membership magazine of the New York Folklore Society (www.nyfolklore.org).

The New York Folklore Society is a nonprofit, statewide organization dedicated to furthering cultural equity and cross-cultural understanding through programs that nurture folk cultural expressions within communities where they originate, share these traditions across cultural boundaries, and enhance the understanding and appreciation of folk culture. Through *Voices* the society communicates with professional folklorists and members of related fields, traditional artists, and a general public interested in folklore.

Voices is dedicated to publishing the content of folklore in the words and images of its creators and practitioners. The journal publishes research-based articles, written in an accessible style, on topics related to traditional art and life. It also features stories, interviews, reminiscences, essays, folk poetry and music, photographs, and artwork drawn from people in all parts of New York State. Columns on subjects such as photography, sound and video recording, legal and ethical issues, and the nature of traditional art and life appear in each issue.

Editorial Policy

Feature articles. Articles published in *Voices* represent original contributions to folklore studies. Although *Voices* emphasizes the folklore of New York State, the editor welcomes articles based on the folklore of any area of the world. Articles on the theory, methodology, and geography of folklore are also welcome, as are purely descriptive articles in the ethnography of folklore. In addition, *Voices* provides a home for “orphan” tales, narratives, and songs, whose contributors are urged to provide contextual information.

Authors are encouraged to include short personal reminiscences, anecdotes, isolated tales, narratives, songs, and other material that relates to and enhances their main article.

Typically feature articles range from 1,000 to 4,000 words and up to 6,000 words at the editor’s discretion.

Reviews and review essays. Books, recordings, films, videos, exhibitions, concerts, and the like are selected for review in *Voices* for their relevance to folklore studies or the folklore of New York State and their potential interest to a wide audience. Persons wishing to review recently published material should contact the editor. Unsolicited reviews and proposals for reviews will be evaluated by the editor and by outside referees where appropriate. Follow the bibliographic style in a current issue of *Voices*. Reviews should not exceed 750 words.

Correspondence and commentary. Short but substantive reactions to or elaborations upon material appearing in *Voices* within the previous year are welcomed. The editor may invite the author of the materials being addressed to respond; both pieces may be published together. Any subject may be addressed or rebutted once by any correspondent. The principal criteria for publication are whether, in the opinion of the editor or the editorial board, the comment constitutes a substantive contribution to folklore studies, and whether it will interest our general readers.

Letters should not exceed 500 words.

Style

The journal follows *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Consult *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* for questions of spelling, meaning, and usage, and avoid gender-specific terminology.

Footnotes. Endnotes and footnotes should be avoided; incorporate such information into the text. Ancillary information may be submitted as a sidebar.

Bibliographic citations. For citations of text from outside sources, use the author-date style described in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

Language. All material must be submitted in English. Foreign-language terms (transliterated, where appropriate, into the Roman alphabet) should be italicized and followed by a concise parenthetical English gloss; the author bears responsibility for the correct spelling and orthographics of non-English words. British spellings should be Americanized.

Publication Process

Unless indicated, the New York Folklore Society holds copyright to all material published in *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*. With the submission of material to the editor, the author acknowledges that he or she gives *Voices* sole rights to its publication, and that permission to publish it elsewhere must be secured in writing from the editor.

For the initial submission, send an e-mail attachment or CD (preferably prepared in Microsoft Word and saved as Rich Text Format).

Copy must be double spaced, with all pages numbered consecutively. To facilitate anonymous review of feature articles, the author’s name and biography should appear only on a separate title page.

Tables, charts, maps, illustrations, photographs, captions, and credits should follow the main text and be numbered consecutively. All illustrations should be clean, sharp, and camera-ready. Photographs should be prints or duplicate slides (not originals) or scanned at high resolution (300+ dpi) and e-mailed to the editor as jpeg or tiff files. Captions and credits must be included. Written permission to publish each image must be obtained by authors from the copyright holders prior to submission of manuscripts, and the written permissions must accompany the manuscript (authors should keep copies).

Materials are acknowledged upon receipt. The editor and two anonymous readers review manuscripts submitted as articles. The review process takes several weeks.

Authors receive two complimentary copies of the issue in which their contribution appears and may purchase additional copies at a discount. Authors of feature articles may purchase offprints; price information is available upon publication.

Submission Deadlines

Spring–Summer issue	November 1
Fall–Winter issue	May 1

Send submissions as Word files to
Todd DeGarmo, *Voices* Editor
(e-mail preferred): degarmo@crandalllibrary.org
or

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