

The Name "Iowa"

T. S. Parvin

W. H. Hildreth

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](#).

Recommended Citation

The Annals of Iowa, 1(6) (Apr. 1864): 268-269

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

THE NAME "IOWA."

[From the Davenport Gazette, April, 1860.]

We find the following letter from Hon. T. S. Parvin, in the last issue of the *Iowa City Reporter* :

In your last issue of the 28th inst., in an article communicated over the signature of "Amphyction," I find the following account of the origin and meaning of the name of our State—"Iowa"—which is incorrect.

From time to time, tourists have been accustomed to write and publish this "legend," interpreting it at one time to signify *beautiful*, at another *home*, &c., &c.

"There is a story among the Indian legends regarding this country, that once upon a time a celebrated Indian chief, with a chosen band of braves, journeying through the land rising upon the bluffs which overlook Iowa City, exclaimed, in his native dialect: "*Iowa! Iowa!—beautiful! beautiful!*"—*Amphyction*.

The word "Iowa" means—"This is the place."—*Antoine Le Claire*.

And the meaning is derived as follows: A tribe of (Sac and Fox) Indians, wandering or hunting, were in search of a *home*, and when they crossed the Mississippi (not the Iowa), they reached a point they admired, and finding all they wished, they exclaimed, "Iowa—this is the place" Hence the derivation of the word, as extracted from an autograph letter in my possession from the high authority quoted.

T. S. PARVIN.

IOWA CITY, March 30, 1860.

MESSRS. EDITORS:—As there appears to be a diversity of opinion as to the meaning and origin of the word "Iowa," I will venture mine for what it is worth.

It is no uncommon thing to find words transposed and corrupted which are transmitted merely by sound, and can be traced back to no written language. And frequently is this

the case with Indian words, which first becoming used by the trader, who is perhaps a Frenchman, or Canadian, who spells the word according to its sound, with the vowels of his own language, which is copied in turn by the tourist, or traveler, who is perhaps an Englishman or American, and thus becomes Anglicised; and as the peculiar aspirates and gutturals of the Indian tongue lose their force in the *written* word, we would scarce be able to recognize the same word *spoken* by a native.

Corruptions, from various causes, are inevitable. Interpretations are sometimes adopted, as for instance Platte river instead of Nebraska, which first term is evidently a corruption of the true meaning, viz: "flat water," but resembling closely an English proper name "Platte," it has finally lost its original sound and meaning.

It is historical that the Omahas first gave the name of "Grey Snow" Indians to the tribe now known as the Iowas; and it is also authentic that they were an off-shoot of the Omahas. A very slight circumstance may have caused the cognomen to have been given. The Indian tradition is that they left the parent tribe in a snow storm, which presented the phenomenon of "grey snow" by mingling the sands of the shore with the falling snow, and thereby sullyng its purity. The original Omaha word "Py-ho-ja" can very readily be corrupted by making the *j* silent, or by using it as a vowel—as in the German language. The word then becomes Py-ho-ia, which can be easily further corrupted into *I-owa*. And with all deference to the interpretation of Mr. Le Claire, who perhaps is more competent than any one else to construe Sac and Fox terms, I would say that although the word Iowa may have a place in the Sac and Fox language—and doubtless he renders it correctly—it is more reasonable to look for it, or its derivation, to the tribe who speak the same language with the Iowas, and from whom they sprung.

W. H. HILDRETH.

EAST DAVENPORT, April 7, 1860.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.