

About Wisconsin, The "Badger" State (Ouisconsin)

“Wisconsin”

Source: Portions of the following is taken from "McBride, Sarah Davis, History Just Ahead" (Madison WHS, 1999); Wisconsin Magazine of History, Vol. 26 1942-1943

Jean Nicollet [also spelled Nicolet] (1598 - 1642) was a French explorer, translator, and negotiator who was the first European to travel through the great lakes area visiting Lake Michigan and what are now Wisconsin and Illinois reaching the Mississippi River in 1634.

In 1673, Thirty-nine years after Nicollet visited the Green Bay area, a Jesuit priest -- Father Jacques Marquette and fur trader, Sieur Louis Joliet set out from New France to explore the Mississippi River. They traveled from the straits of Mackinac between lakes Huron and Michigan to the Fox River at the foot of Green Bay.

Two Miami Indian guides led them via the Fox, from which they portaged (at present day the city of Portage) to the river for which the state is named. Marquette and Joliet referred to the Wisconsin River as the Miskonsing, Meskonsing, Meskousing, Meskous and Miskous, using variations on one of the Native American names for the river.

Marquette wrote in his journal; “The River on which we embarked is called Meskousing. It is very wide; it has a sandy bottom, which forms various shoals that render its navigation very difficult.”

The second appearance of the river was on the 1683 map drawn by Father Hennepin; there it is spelled Ouisconsin, clearly indicative of the French pronunciation of the Indian name.

In 1900, George Johnson, a half-breed educated Chippewa, wrote in volume XV of the Wisconsin Historical Collection that the river received its name from "The land of the Sacs, and from its name (Osawgenong), signifying the sortie of the Foxes or Sacs.

In 1711, the government of Louisiana comprising all the "Illinois country" was placed in the hands of a governor-general--Dirau D'Artaquette--with headquarters at the site of the present city

of Mobile, where a new fort was erected. "Louisiana" was at this time held by France and claimed to embrace the whole valley of the Mississippi River and all its tributaries, and to extend north to the great lakes, and the waters of Hudson's Bay, and of course, included all of the present state of Wisconsin.

By the treaty of Paris, made in 1763, all the claims of the French to the country watered by the Ohio and Mississippi and all the French possessions were ceded to Great Britain. By a secret treaty however, made on the same day the definitive articles of the treaty of Paris had been signed (November 3, 1762), France ceded to Spain all Louisiana west of the Mississippi and the island of Orleans.

Great Britain, when the treaty was concluded, February 10, 1763, acquired the country east of the Mississippi, which river was to remain equally free to the subjects of Great Britain and France.

In 1779, Virginia obtained possession of the territory of the great Northwest comprising the area that would later become the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and a large part of Minnesota. Henceforth, the Northwest remained relatively quite during the progress of the Revolutionary war.

The treaty of peace of 1783 was not accompanied by the immediate surrender of the British posts to the American authorities. More than 10 years of diplomatic controversy intervened before a great part of the disputes were in a measure settled by Jay's treaty of 1794 and it was not until 1796 that the posts in the Northwest were evacuated and delivered up to the Americans.

In May of 1800, the Northwest Territory was divided and the new territory of Indiana was established, embracing what was to become states of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and that part of Minnesota east of the Mississippi River.

When the state of Illinois was created in 1818, all of the remaining unorganized part of the old Northwest Territory to the north was added to the Michigan Territory, which had been in existence since 1805. It was generally understood that the name "Michigan" would be permanently applied to the area east of Lake Michigan, but for the next eighteen years there seemed to be great uncertainty as to what name to give the area between Lake Michigan

and the Mississippi River. Its evolution to Wisconsin is obvious, this being the English spelling suggested by the pronunciation of Ouisconsin.

James Duane Doty, an early territorial governor, is generally credited with having been the first to suggest that it be named "*Wiskonsan*", although earlier he had proposed "*Chippewau*". An examination of early maps of the area shows, however, that the name Wisconsin had been applied in print as the fifth "state" of the Northwest Territory five years prior to the Doty proposal, in fact the name had been proposed before Doty left New York State to make his home in the west.

In 1830, John Farmer of Detroit published a map of the "Territories of Michigan and *Oisconsin*", maybe reflecting local usage. A bill to that effect had passed the lower house of the congress in 1829 but with the proposed title of "Huron Territory". In 1832 when a similar bill was under consideration, there was a discussion on the name choice. The chairman of the committee on territories explained that "Wisconsin" had been substituted for "Huron" in conformity with the wishes of the inhabitants, suggested to them, no doubt by the name of the river. The territory was created with that name and spelling on April 20, 1836 (some say July 4, 1836).

On January 30, 1845 the Wisconsin territorial legislature, in a formal resolution, officially endorsed "*Wisconsin*" as the accepted spelling for the territory and thus also for the river despite the objection of some substantial citizens, including Territorial Governor James Doty who preferred *Wiskonsan*.

Many interpretations of the state's name have been suggested, including "*The place of the gathering of the waters,*" *Red cliff*", "*Red earth place*" "*River of thousand isles,*" "*A good place in which to live,*" "*Wild rushing river*" "*The river of flowery banks (Kee-ko-sa-ra)*" and "*At the great point,*" all of which seem appropriate descriptions of Wisconsin's unique and varied geography.

August Derleth, after much research, came to the conclusion that the name *Wisconsin*, translated to "*River of a*

Thousand Isles". In 1942 Derleth wrote -- "The first recorded printing of the name in its earliest form was in Pere [Jacques?] Marquette's *Journal*, which was published in 1681 in Paris. The priest spelled the name *Meskousing*, *Miskous* and, on the map published with the *Journal*, *Messc8sing* -- the 8 used in place of *ou*. Of its Indian origin, there can be no question whatever. Writing in her *Old Forts and Real Folks*, published as recently as 1939, Susan Burdick Davis says that the second part of the word -- *sing*, *sin* or *san* -- was probably an Indian ending indicating place or location.

Ethnolinguist Michael McCafferty closely examined "*Meskousing*" in a 2003 article and concluded that it signified a stream that "meanders through something red." Since conspicuous reddish outcrops occur along the Wisconsin River from Wisconsin Rapids to Prairie du Sac, especially among the Dells, these were probably the source of the name "Wisconsin."

So...you as the reader can decide how Wisconsin came by its name...!

"Badger"

In the mid-1600's a lead-mining boom took place in the southern part of Wisconsin and in a few months other mines were opened up on the sites of old Indian diggings. Rumors of the richness of the Wisconsin lead mines spread down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, to Kentucky and Tennessee, to the Atlantic states, and to England and other European countries. Thousand of prospectors came up the Mississippi River by boat to try their fortunes. When winter set in, many of these prospectors for one reason or another was unable to return home. They had not taken time to build homes and there were no taverns or boarding houses for them to live in during the winter. Having no place to go, they entered mine tunnels to live as best they could through the cold winter months. These people were christened "**Badgers**" by their Illinois associates, named after an Illinois animal by that name which lived in a hole in the ground. That gave rise to the name "**Badger State**" by which Wisconsin is known.

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Expanding Days (1830-1850)

by
Harry Ellsworth Cole

It was a period when evolution was beginning to be a mighty concept and when religious concept and when religious ideals were no longer of everlasting punishment in a furnace of fire. Some sects still purchased muslin for ascension robes, but these were never worn beyond a neighboring roof from which followers of the cult expected to be translated into another world. These were the days of the grain-cradle, the flail, the horse-power threshing machine, the tallow candle or kerosene lamp, house-raising, rail-splitting, contra-dances, spelling bees. It was the day of log houses, ox-yokes, and well-sweeps. Newspapers advertised a preparation known as water-lime and salt, also sozodont, cholera mixture, vitalized air, pictures printed by sun's rays, galvanic belts, Arabian liniment for neuralgia, coach-wheel quilts, buffalo robes, bootjacks, bed-cords, rafting cable, melodeons, ambrotypes, mozambiques, paper collars, hop-plows, hop-roots, hop-poles. A feather bed was not an infrequent dowry, and money was so rare that skins of animals and jugs of whiskey were often pressed into service as legal tender.

Addendum of Interest

The Miami tribe spoke of the state as *Ouiskensing* during the French regime. They also referred to the river as the *Ouiskonchi* river.

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