

Place of the Cleared Land: True Origin of the Name “Michigan”

Eliot A. Singer ¹

At the back of the 1916 edition of *The Crooked Tree*, John C. Wright noted that in the Ottawa language: “Michigan signifies a ‘clearing’ and was first applied to the northwestern shores of lower Michigan where there were large ancient clearings. The Indian pronunciation is ‘Mashiganing.’” Also, “Northport—Michiganing—‘A clearing.’” ²

This obscure glossary entry is key to understanding how the lake and state received its name. It has been generally assumed “Michigan,” like so many garbled renderings of native place names, was a mistake, substituting an -n- for an -m-. As George Johnston put it in an August 1844 letter to Henry Schoolcraft from Grand Traverse Bay: “Michegan, Great bone. Michegam, Great lake.” ³ Baraga’s *Dictionary* had: “Michigan, from Michigâm, or, Michigâmaw, the big Lake.” ⁴ Blackbird wrote in his *History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan*: “Michigan is an Indian word which we pronounce Mi-chi-gum, and simply means monstrous lake.” ⁵

However, when Père Claude Allouez referred to the lake in 1669, it was as “Lake of the Ilinioues, which is called Machihiganing.” ⁶ A few years later, a map by Joliet, connected to his voyage with Marquette, showed “Lac des Illinois ou Missihigan” (pronounced -sh-, as with Missilimakinak on the same map). ⁷

Vogel, for his *Indian Names in Michigan*, failed to seek an etymology for Machihiganing. ⁸ Had he checked Baraga’s *Dictionary*, he would have found: “majiiigan,” “a cleared piece of land.” ⁹ In contemporary practical orthography, this is spelled “mazhii’igan,” “cut-over clearing”; “mazhii’ige” is the verb for “to clear land”—the glottal stop -‘- is sometimes represented by -h-; “-ing” is a standard locative ending. ¹⁰

Thus Machihiganing (Mazhii’igan-ing) means “place of the cleared land.”

There has been some previous speculation for this etymology. Per 1940 unpublished fieldnotes of linguists C. F. Voegelin and J. P. Harrington, Gregor McGregor of Birch Island, Ontario, said that the name referred to “cleared land, also to a shore-section of a lake cleared of floating driftwood or to the beach of a lake cleared of driftwood accumulation.” ¹¹ More recently, McCafferty has called attention to Allouez’ usage as the likely correct derivation, however without seeking any actual location that would have warranted such a place name. ¹²

¹ Northport local historian, Dustin Bissell, came across a hitherto unnoticed glossary item from Wright’s *Crooked Tree*, then consulted with me. A quick check of a few references made it clear he had discovered the missing link to the correct origin of the name “Michigan” (E.A.S).

² J. C. Wright, *The Crooked Tree* (Harbor Springs 1916). The additional reference should place archeologists on the alert for possible evidence of proto-historical horticulture near Northport.

³ Eliot A. Singer, *George Johnston’s Grand Traverse*.

⁴ R. Bishop (Frederick) Baraga, *A Dictionary of the Otchipwe Language* (Montreal, Beauchemin & Valois, 1878, pt. 1, p. 300).

⁵ A. J. Blackbird, *History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians of Michigan* (Ypsilanti, 1887, p. 93).

⁶ *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, vol 54, pp. 220-221.

⁷ <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11574.html>.

⁸ Virgil Vogel, *Indian Names in Michigan* (Ann Arbor 1986, pp. 2-3).

⁹ Baraga, *A Dictionary of the Otchipwe Language*, pt. 2, p. 207.

¹⁰ John Nichols and Earl Nyholm, *A Concise Dictionary of Minnesota Ojibwe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p. 79).

¹¹ <https://miidashgeget.wordpress.com/2018/12/24/ojibwe-loan-words-in-english/#0205>

¹² Michael McCafferty, “Getting to ‘Lake Michigan’: A 350-year Onomastic Odyssey,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 112, 2019, pp.350-351.

From Odaawaa oral histories, there can be no doubt the "large ancient clearings" on the "northwestern shores of lower Michigan" were those of the people they called Mashkodensh (and variations).¹³

The south side of the straits...our tradition says, was exceedingly thickly populated by another race of Indians, whom the Ottawas called Mush-co-desh, which means, "the Prairie tribe." They were so called on account of being great cultivators of the soil, and making the woodland into prairie as they abandoned their old worn out gardens which formed grassy plains.

So, in fact, "Michigan" represents the most recognizable lower Peninsula feature to the non-resident proto-historical Odaawaa, a feature created by the people who lived there at the time it first became indirectly known to the French and probably, at least seasonally, for hundreds of years previous.

¹³ Blackbird, History, p. 90.