**River names that endure** June 04,2015

Native American peoples named places because they, like all people, needed commonly understood names to locate themselves and tell others of their location. Although different bands had somewhat different names for the same place, their naming lexicon described the attributes of many rivers. In many cases, the names stuck and remain the same to this day. So let us take a trip downriver and see what the names of several of the **well-known tributaries to the Connecticut River** meant to the original inhabitants of our valley.

**The New Hampshire names** start with the Ammonoosuc River that originates in the heart of the White Mountain National Forest and then flows west for 55 miles before entering the Connecticut River in Haverhill, N.H. Ammonoosuc is Abenaki for “the river of small, narrow fishing places.” The Abenaki fished and camped along the river, netting fish in the narrow river bends. Archaeologists have documented six sites of Native American camps along the river.

The Mascoma River empties into the Connecticut in Lebanon, N.H., and comprises two reaches, upper and lower, split by Mascoma Lake. Two bands of American Indians used the word Mascoma. To the Abenaki, Mascoma meant “salmon fishing place with much grass.” To the Natick band, the word meant “big beach on a grassy swamp.”

The Ashuelot River is the longest tributary to the Connecticut River within New Hampshire at 64 miles, draining a mountainous area of 425 square miles including the area known as the Monadnock region. In the Natick language, Ashuelot meant “the place river between mountains,” in this case probably between Mount Monadnock and West Hill. Mount Monadnock is a unique formation that lends its name to an entire class of mountains, those that stand alone in a flat plain, an easily visible locator for the river.

**Over in Vermont**, the Nulhegan band of the Abenaki still live in the Northeast Kingdom. The word Nulhegan means “the place of log traps,” describing wooden weirs built to catch fish. The Nulhegan Basin is now part of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, established to protect the diversity and abundance of native species in this region of the watershed.

The Abenaki word Passumpsic means “flowing over a clear sandy bottom,” an apt description given the glacier-influenced terrain in this area. An esker is a long, narrow winding ridge of stratified sand and gravel that occurs in formerly glaciated regions. The Passumpsic valley esker is the longest in Vermont and New Hampshire with this esker extending 20 miles from St. Johnsbury northward all the way to East Haven.

The Ompompanoosuc River rises in the town of Vershire and flows generally southward where it joins the Connecticut River in the town of Norwich. The Abenaki word for the river means “at the place of mushy, quaky land.” Its neighbor just to the south, the Ottauquechee River joins the main Connecticut River at Hartland. Its Natick language meaning is a “swift mountain stream.”

**Moving south to Massachusetts**, Chicopee is a Nipmuc word that identifies a location of “violent waters” that in most Algonquian dialects refers to rapids. The Chicopee River with its drainage area of 721 square miles is the largest tributary area to the Connecticut River. In 1660, Europeans divided the land purchased from the Indians into two districts. Nayasett, Nipmuc for “at the small point” was the name given to what is now Chicopee Center. The settlement in the upper district was at Skipmuck, based on Nipmuc meaning “chief fishing place.”

The Manhan River in the native language of the Nipmuc means “island or the place of the island.” Although there is little backup information about what the word was describing, when one looks at the Google image of the mouth of the Manhan at the Connecticut River there likely was an island formed there when the river split into two branches.

Dropping farther south into Connecticut, the Hockanum River name derived from the Mohican word meaning “hook-shaped,” so named because of the course of the river. It rises at the outlet of Shenipsit Lake, flowing to its mouth on the Connecticut River immediately north of the Charter Oak Bridge.

The Mattabesset River gained its name from the Chipewa who called it “at the end of the carrying (portage) or the sitting down place.” Mattabeseck is a regional variant of the same word and means “land between waters.” Traveling up the Mattabesset leads to the portage to or from the Quinnipiac River, allowing a canoer to reach Long Island Sound at New Haven Harbor.

The Coginchaug River is a tributary to the Mattabesset River and flows from an upland meadow, northwards to the Mattabesset just upstream of that river’s junction with the Connecticut. Historically, two bands used the word Coginchaug. To the Mattabesset tribe, the word Coginchaug meant “long swamp or winding meadow.” The word Coginchaug for the Wangunk band of Abenaki meant “at the place where they cure (smoke) fish.”

That ends our quick linguistic tour of the watershed for now. If you know any of these rivers, think about how accurately American Indian names capture the attributes of the rivers.

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