

MACOUPIN RIVER

(This article was taken from the ILLINOIS MAGAZINE and was written by William E. Werner Jr.)

Macoupin County is celebrating its sesquicentennial anniversary this year. When it was founded one hundred and fifty years ago, the name for the county was taken from the stream, which drains most of its land, Macoupin Creek. Tradition was according to the 1879 history of the county, that the name Macoupin came from an Indian name Macoupina, which meant white potato, and referred to the wild artichoke (Jerusalem artichoke, *Helianthus tuberoses*), which grew abundantly along the watercourses.

Research into the history of the state, however, revealed some facts about the name Macoupin of which undoubtedly the American settlers of the county and the authors of the 1879 county history were unaware. Some of this information has been discovered by historians in obscure manuscripts only within the last fifty years. Among them are descriptions of the macoupin plant by early French explorers and colonists which indicated that the artichoke was not the macoupin and that the name macoupin had been used for four different Illinois streams. Early maps show that the Illinois River, the Spoon River, the Kankakee River, and Maocupin Creek at one time or another have been called Macoupin, or a variation of the name.

The Illinois River has been designated by many names in the past three hundred years. A map made in 1672 by the French mapmaker Hugues Randin show it as Riviere de la Divine ou Loutrelaise. Parkman, in his book "LaSalle and the Discover of the Great West", surmised that the name Divine referred to Madame de Frontenac and her friend Mademoiselle d'Outrelaise. They were known at court as les Divines. To honor Frontenac, governor of New France, the river was probably named after these ladies. Randin was Frontenac's engineer.

A map made in 1682 by Claude Berron and M. Peronel show the river named River Sengenplay, with the northern branch called R. Divine. Sengenplay (on some maps spelled Seignelay) possibly refers to marquis de Seignelay, secretary of state of France and, like his father, a supporter of the explorer LaSalle.

In 1684, a map by Jean-Baptiste Franquelin, an engineer and hydrographer to the Kind of France at Quebec, designated the Illinois River as Riviere des Ilinois on Macopins. This is the first reference to the plant, which apparently grew in the Illinois River and its larger tributaries. A map made in 1688 by the same man, used only the name Riviere des Ilinois, and subsequent maps also used only this one name, although by 1755, the word was spelled Illinois as we do today on a map in English by John Mitchell.

The Spoon River, made famous by Edgar lee Master's "Spoon River Anthology", was the second stream to be called Macoupin, or a variation of the name. On a map in 1686, Fraquelin first named this river R. Macopin. Previously it was either drawn on maps without a name, or it was not shown at all. A 1710 map shows the name spelled Masopin. On a map made in 1812, the name had changed to McQuinn. Another map dated 1815 shows the name as Mequen, and still another of 1819 designated the stream as R. Micouenne or Spoon River. Chandler, in "Spoon River County" noted the river was once named Maquoin, which meant "big", and that this changed to Mequeen, and then to Spoon. Leeson, in "History of Stark County", says the river was called Maquoin or

Feather River, and that Maquoin was an Indian word for feather. However, considering how rapidly names changed, probably in the absence of printed maps and therefore the necessity of passing on information about place names primarily by word of mouth, it is possible that all these names are derivatives of the word Macopin.

But where did the word Spoon come from? Was it a further alteration of the word macopin? There are two traditions for its origin. According to Leeson, "its present name is said to have been given by Dr. Davidson, the hermit, on account of a bayou resembling a spoon in the formation off its shores near what is now the village of Waterford in Fulton County". There is also a legend, which gives another origin for the name Spoon River. According to Chandler, one day there was a raft loaded with men on the river. They were short of utensils, and were cooking their dinner in a pot on the raft. Somehow, the only spoon they had, which was to be used for all, was dropped overboard. The event was so disturbing that the river was named after the event!

The Kankakee River has also undergone numerous name changes in its history. Parkman states that in 1679 the river was called Theakiki or Haukiki, and that the French corrupted it to Kiakiki. He also stated that the name "Theakiki" was a name applied to the entire course of the Illinois River, but I have never seen it on a map on which it was so used. A map made in 1688 by the Italian Marco Coronelli, shows the Kankakee as Keakiki. A map made in 1718 by Guillaume DeLisle shows the upper part of the Illinois River that would correspond to the Kankakii called R. de Macoupin. An eastward extension was called the Huakiki R. On a 1733 map by Poppel, the river was named Haukiki or Macapen R. By 1778, Thomas Hutchins, an American, designated the stream Theakiki R., and in 1815, a map by Rene Paul spelled the name Mackapin, and finally, in 1818, a map by John Melish shows the name of the stream with the present spelling, Macoupin. Interestingly, a later map, made in 1825 by E. Brown and E. Barcroft, used the spelling McGoupin, which very closely approximates the way natives of the county still pronounce the name. When the county was created in 1829, the present spelling of "Macoupin" was used, and has persisted in that form.

In 1934, Pease and Werner published for the first time in "The French Foundations", a memoir written by Pierre de Liette in 1721. As a young man, DeLiette lived with the Illinois Indians and learned their language. He records seeing women dig the macopine root from the water up to waist deep, and mentions it was their most prized root. From his descriptions it seems fairly certain this was the arrow arum, *peltandra virginica*, the same species that Indians along the east coast from Virginia to New York considered their main bread root, called Tuckahoe. So Macoupin County really has two macoupin plants, the traditional wild artichoke, and the historically older macopine or arrow arum. It is fortunate that in the name of the stream and county, a very old Illinois name, Macoupin, has been preserved.

Most of the maps mentioned above are found in an atlas by Sara Jones Tucker. For assistance in locating others, I am indebted to Dr. Robert Sutton and his staff of the Illinois Historical Survey Library, and to Dr. David Cobb and his staff of the Map and Geography Library, all of the University of Illinois.

REFERENCE: Chandler, Josephine Crave, Spoon River Country. Springfield, 1923.
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