

# Koshkonong name remains open question

By Steve Engelbert  
The Janesville Gazette Staff

An 1833 survey of Albion Township in Jefferson County referred to the state's eighth-biggest lake as "Kishkanon."

That same year, a survey of Porter Township in Rock County called it "Kushkawenong." And an 1823 map referred to the Winnebago Indian village at "Coscoenage."

James Doty dubbed the lake and nearby creek "Koshkonong" in 1844. The Doty spelling was the 16th on record, and it stuck.

And just what Koshkonong, Coscoenage and Kushkawenong mean is still an open question. Frederic G. Cassidy, an English professor at UW-Madison, put his mark on the argument with a 1945 article, "Koshkonong--A Misunderstood Place Name."

Cassidy listed what he believed were mistakes in earlier interpretations in his article:

--A 1892 article in the Wisconsin Historical Society collection claims the name is "probably a corruption of gwaskwaning," which means "jumping" in the Winnebago language.

--A file of geographic names in the State Historical Society Library says: "Possibly refers to Koshkosh--a log"

--The word means "what he kept for himself," according to a Milwaukee Journal story on Feb. 21, 1932. The story claimed that was a Potawatami Indian interpretation of the phrase.

--"Thiebau, the old French trader and early settler at Beloit, told me that name Koshkonong was of Winnebago derivation and means 'the place where we shave.' As when he and other traders first came into the country they left their razors at the lake and would travel among the Indians trading for furs; but when they wanted to shave they returned to their headquarters at the lake." That is according to I.T. Smith in "Early Settlement of Rock County--Journal," Nov. 26, 1835.

--Another writer claimed that the word Koshkonong is Algonquin, not Potawatami. "If the syllable 'koshk' is changed to 'ki-ashk' the word would then be Ki-ask-on-ong, meaning place of the gulls."

Cassidy found that explanation the most logical, but he rejected it along with others, including the most oft-repeated one. "The explanation most widely accepted today is that Koshkonong means "the lake we live on," Cassidy wrote.

The blame for that mistake belongs to Joshua Hathaway, whose article on the Black Hawk War, gave "the lake we live on" respectability.

Hathaway wrote: "Kosh-ko-nong, or more properly Kosh-kaw-a-nong, (third syllable unaccented) signifying 'the lake we live on' was for many weeks the lurking place of the families of Black Hawk's warriors in the troubles of 1832."

"Lurking place," has a racist feel to it, that perhaps was more understandable when Hathaway wrote his article, 17 years after the Black Hawk War.

Cassidy criticizes Hathaway on scholarly grounds, not for the sin of bigotry. "The lake we live on" was written on John Farmer's "Map of the territories of Michigan and Ouisconsin," the first map drafted of this area.

Farmer was just writing a label for the area, not a translation of an Indian word, Cassidy said. "...Koshkonong cannot be so translated. Hathaway has evidently been misled."

Records calling the lake some derivation of Koshkonong go back to 1820, so Hathaway jumped to the conclusion that the translation was the phrase on the early maps.

"Once printed in an authoritative publication this explanation gained currency, to which county historians added, and today, though wrong, it has become virtually established by repetition," Cassidy wrote.

Hathaway claimed Chief Black Hawk dubbed the lake "the lake we live on." But that can't be true, since Black Hawk didn't get there until 1832 and Farmer had put it on the map in 1830, Cassidy said.

So here is Cassidy's explanation.

"'Koshkonong' was evidently first applied to a Winnebago village, from which it passed to the lake on which the village lay." Dr. Jedidiah Morse, after an 1820 trip to the area, wrote in a report to the War Department that the largest of 14 Winnebago villages was known as Kus-kou-o-nong. "Their village is on the west side of a lake of the name of their village, six miles long by three wide," Morse wrote.

But although the village was Winnebago, the name of the village was Algonquin. The white explorers learned the name from Algonquins--Fox and Ojibwa Indians, Cassidy said. The name "Winnebago" isn't even a Winnebago word but an Ojibwa one.

The Winnebagoes called themselves "Hochungara," Cassidy noted.

The professor studied the Ojibwa word and concluded that Koshkonong, however it is spelled, means "where it is closed by fog," or "a sheltered place behind a windbreak (where fog might remain).

But a 1961 paper "Early History of Lake Koshkonong," by W.H. "Bill" Rogers, disputes Cassidy. Rogers, who was aware of Cassidy's article, wrote: "I have heard that Winnebagoes have translated the name as "Place of gathering rice."

But then he concluded that "the lake we live on was probably correct."

[Close Window](#)