

Origins of the Name

Tahquamenon

Is it just a name or a glimpse into the past?

With names like Mackinaw, Watersmeet and Nahma, Michigan's cultural, geographical and natural heritage has had a broad influence on the naming of its places.

Names rich in the Native American language such as Menominee and Negaunee reflect the earliest people of the region. Names like Sault Ste Marie and Grand Marais reveal the French influence during the fur trade. Michigan even has industrial names such as Coalwood, Copper Harbor and Iron River.

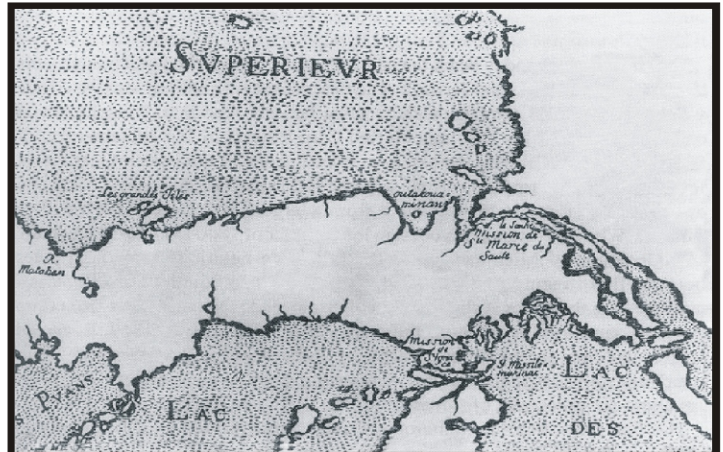
The origins of place names often serve as a window into the past. Here at Tahquamenon Falls State Park, there is no shortage of these unique names that can tell you a great deal about the history of the area.

Places like Whitefish Bay, Camp 10 lakes and even Emerson all are fairly easy to guess how those names came to be. Whitefish Bay was named for the abundance of whitefish in this region. Camp 10 lakes got its name from logging camp #10 that was located nearby, and the former sawmill town of Emerson was named, not after the famous author, but after the lumber millionaire/founder of the town, Curt Emerson.

The word Tahquamenon has not been as easy to trace. There have been many theories to the origins of this name, such as the color of the water of the Tahquamenon River or meaning the place of the blueberry swamps.

In his book, "*Lake Superior Place Names: From Bawating to the Montreal*," Dr. Bernard C. Peters sheds additional light on the subject. Peters suggests the word Tahquamenon comes from the word Outakouaminan, which appears on a 1671 Jesuit map. The key is its location on the map. Because it is shown near an island in what now is Whitefish Bay, Peters believes the name actually refers to a shortcut across the bay.

To avoid the rapids at Sault Ste Marie, early travelers



Section of the 1671 Jesuit map of Michigan.
Source: Michigan Academician, Volume XXVI,
winter 1994

Often used the Tahquamenon River as a water Highway from Lake Michigan to Lake Superior. For centuries, these travelers would camp at the mouth of the Tahquamenon River before embarking across Whitefish Bay on the way to Sault Ste. Marie. But instead of following the coast around the bay, the canoers would paddle out to now Tahquamenon Island in Lake Superior, where they could take refuge if the waters got too rough. It is this shortcut to the island from which the term Outakouaminan originates.

Over the years, Outakouaminan has been phonetically spelled Otahquamenaw, Otiqwaminag, Tequoimenon, Jackwaminan and, of course, Tahquamenaw in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem, "*Hiawatha*." Today, we finally have settled on Tahquamenon.

Did you Know

Nahma, in Delta County, is an Indian name for sturgeon. The Sturgeon River runs through the town and sturgeon once were abundant throughout the Great Lakes region, including here at Tahquamenon. One legend tells of a powerful spirit living under the Lower Falls of the Tahquamenon River, who had the body of a giant sturgeon and the head of a human. Another legend speaks of a secret underground waterway about six miles upstream from the mouth of the Tahquamenon called *Nahmawashing* or Sturgeon Den. This is the secret route sturgeon would take in the spring to their spawning grounds.