

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

VERITAS CAPUT: ITASCA

On July 11, 1832, a select party of men under Henry Rowe Schoolcraft set out from Cass Lake to explore the source of the Mississippi. A Chippewa Indian named Ozawindib, or the Yellowhead, acted as guide. The party of sixteen included Lieutenant James Allen, Dr. Douglas Houghton, a surgeon-geologist, and George Johnston, a half-breed interpreter. The Reverend William T. Boutwell, a missionary to the Chippewa, accompanied the explorers by special invitation.

Ozawindib guided Schoolcraft and his men up the hitherto unknown east fork of the Mississippi to its source. A six-mile portage brought them to Lake Itasca, the true source of the Mississippi. The lake had a single island upon which the exploring party landed and raised the American emblem on a flagstaff on July 13, 1832. The island is known to this day as Schoolcraft Island. Other explorers, real and pretended, have added to the knowledge of the sources of the Mississippi, but Schoolcraft is generally acknowledged as the discoverer of Lake Itasca, the "principal reservoir" of the Father of Waters.

One question remained, however, which has baffled historians for several generations. Whence came the beautiful name "Itasca"? At the time of the discovery neither Schoolcraft, nor Allen, nor Houghton, nor Boutwell, seems to have given a satisfactory explanation of the origin and use of this name. In 1853 Mrs. Mary H. Eastman published the *American Aboriginal Portfolio*, in which she recounts that Itasca was the daughter of Nanabozho, the spirit god of the Chippewa, and that her falling tears formed the lake. In 1872 Mrs. Eastman declared that Schoolcraft had received the story from his Chippewa guide

and had told it to her. Schoolcraft apparently supplied some foundation for this theory in a poem on the lovely Itasca which was included in his *Summary Narrative* of the expeditions of 1820 and 1832 published in 1855. In the same book, however, he states that Ozawindib had given the Indian name for the lake as "*Omushkös*," which was the Chippewa name for elk.

In 1872 new light was shed on the origin of the name by the Reverend William T. Boutwell. Replying to an inquiry as to the origin of the word Itasca, Boutwell declared that while paddling slowly across Lake Superior, Schoolcraft had turned to him and said:

I would like to give a name to Elk Lake that will be significant or expressive, as the *head* or *true source* of the Mississi[ppi]. Can you give me any word in Latin or Greek that will convey the idea. I replied no one word will express the idea—the nearest I can come to it is Veritus Caput—or if you prefer the noun Veritas—you may coin something that will meet your wishes. In less than five minutes he replied I have got the thing—handing me a slip of paper on which was the word *Itasca*. . . . It was then & there & in just this manner the word, the name *Itasca* was coined. The Ojibwas invariably called the lake Omushkos Sagaeigun [Elk lake].

Thus, at the suggestion of Boutwell, the name "Itasca" was coined by Schoolcraft, by taking from the expression *veritas caput* the last four letters of the word *veritas* and combining them with the first two letters of the word *caput*, making the new word "Itasca." It may be added that the fanciful creation of new words or names by dividing two familiar words and combining the parts, as in the case of Itasca, was not uncommon in the period of the Schoolcraft explorations.

Although the Boutwell explanation of the name Itasca was generally accepted in the years that followed, some writers still clung to the Chippewa legend. And there were others who believed that the word might have been derived from the Ojibway words "*Ia* to be, *totosh* the female breast, or origin, and *ka* a terminal subs, inflection," the

whole *ia-totosh-ka* signifying a fount. This explanation, which originated with Schoolcraft, was actually accepted in the 1882 edition of *Webster's Dictionary*. Students of the Dakota language also pointed to a possible origin from the language of that nation.

Boutwell's explanation received further corroboration from the Reverend Jeremiah Porter in a letter written to Jacob V. Brower in the early nineties. Porter declared that upon the return of Schoolcraft, Houghton, and Allen in 1832 "they told me how they had named so beautifully the lake from two Latin words."¹

The question of the origin of the name still remained unsolved in 1932, when the Minnesota Historical Society and other organizations celebrated at Itasca State Park the centennial of the discovery of the source of the Mississippi. Hundreds of pages had been written about the park and its name, but the matter still lay open to debate. After carefully evaluating the problem Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, concluded:

In the light of Porter's corroboration, the case at present seems to lean toward the Boutwell explanation, though the episode of the Latin words may possibly have occurred on the return journey rather than on the trip west. It is obvious that something is lacking in the evidence, however. It is an intriguing little problem and it is to be hoped that from some source will come the key that will unlock the mystery.²

That key—a contemporary verification of Boutwell's *veritas caput* by a member of the expedition—may now be

¹ For earlier discussions in this magazine of the origin of the name "Itasca," see Edward C. Gale, "The Legend of Lake Itasca," Irving H. Hart, "The Origin and Meaning of the Name 'Itasca,'" and Theodore C. Blegen, "That Name 'Itasca,'" *ante*, 12:215-229, 13:163-174. A fuller account of the Schoolcraft expedition appears in the writer's new book, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi* (Iowa City, 1937).

² Blegen, *ante*, 13:174. Dr. Blegen calls attention to a statement of the Latin derivation of the name given by Edward D. Neill as early as 1858, fourteen years before Boutwell published his explanation. See *ante*, 13:166.

presented. It comes from Schoolcraft himself! After leaving Lake Itasca on July 13, 1832, the day of the discovery, Schoolcraft hastened down the Mississippi, arriving at Fort Snelling eleven days later. On the following day—July 25, 1832—he wrote a letter to Dr. Addison Philleo, editor of a Galena newspaper, describing the expedition to the true source of the Mississippi. The contents of this letter are all that is needed to substantiate the Boutwell explanation.³

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA CITY

SCHOOLCRAFT TO PHILLEO, July 25, 1832

[From the *Galenian*, August 22, 1832.]

ST. PETERS, July 25th, 1832.

DR. ADDISON PHILLEO.

DEAR SIR:—I arrived at this place yesterday, from an expedition through the Chippewa country on the sources of the Mississippi, accompanied by a detachment of troops under Lieut. Allen of the 5th Inf'y. A commanding influence has been exercised, in former years, over some part of this extensive region, by the North West Company, and since its fall, by the Hudson's Bay Company, who oppose our traders [*sic*] strenuously on the lines, and supply their clerks with high wines to attract the Indian population to their posts.—Political and commercial honor go together, and the former is made subservient to the latter. Medals and flags are, I am informed, distributed by them to Indians living within the boundaries of the United States. Old prejudices are kept alive, and new ones are excited. The strife for furs merges every thing else. And if it is not marked by the sanguinary acts, which characterize the last years of the rivalry for the fur trade carried on among themselves, it is not less ardently, recklessly and successfully pursued, with respect to American traders.

Many of the Chippewas on Lake Superior, and in the region of

³ The letter is reprinted herewith from Philleo's paper, the *Galenian*, for August 22, 1832. A file of the paper is in the possession of the Chicago Historical Society. The letter was reprinted, with some variations, in *Niles' Register*, 43:227 (December 1, 1832).

Lac du Flambeau, still visit the British posts in Upper Canada to procure the presents which are annually distributed there. I met a large party, in a canoe,⁴ who were destined for the British post at Penetanguishine. And these men would pass Fort Brady, on their outward, and inward route.⁵

To counteract the political influence thus exerted, has been among the objects of the expedition, and to keep them at peace with the Government and with *each other*. The latter has been a task of difficulty, as the state of hostile feeling among the Chippewas and Sioux has acquired the inveteracy of a hereditary feud. War parties are continually trespassing upon the territorial boundaries of each other. And fresh scalps have been danced⁶ (round) at Red lake, Cass lake, and Leech lake during the time of my passing through the country. War has been the engrossing theme, and it has not been an easy task to declare pacific measures, and enforce them with arguments which a savage people could appreciate, while the war drums and the scalp yell were sent forth from other parts of the premises.

We found the waters of the Mississippi in a good state for ascending, and I availed myself of this circumstance to carry into effect, the desire of visiting its actual sources, a point which has continued to be problematical in our geography. Pike placed it at Leech lake in 1806. Gov. Cass carried it much further north, and left it at Red Cedar lake in 1820. But it was then ascertained that its sources were considerably north and west of that lake. I encamped the expedition and troops and heavy baggage at this lake, and proceeded up the river in five small birch canoes, capable of containing one man and his bed, in addition to the Indian and Canadian who conducted it. The Mississippi⁷ expands into several lakes, the largest of which is called lac Traverse [*Bemidji*]. A few miles above this it forms into a south west and north west branch. We ascended the latter, through a

⁴ In *Niles' Register*, this statement reads: "We met a large party in canoes."

⁵ Fort Brady was located on the present site of Sault Ste. Marie in 1822 by Colonel Hugh Brady with two hundred and fifty men. Penetanguishine was the post to which the British removed following the evacuation of Drummond Island in 1828. It was located on the eastern end of Georgian Bay.

⁶ This word is followed by the phrase, "after the Indian manner," in *Niles' Register*.

⁷ Following this word, the phrase "above this point" appears in *Niles' Register*.

[n]umber of lakes to its source in a small creek. From thence we made a portage of 6 miles, with our canoes, into La Biche or Itasca lake (from a derivation of the expression *veritas caput*) which is the true source of this celebrated stream, being at the same time, its most western and northern head.⁸ This lake is about 7 miles long, having somewhat the shape of the letter Y. It has clear water and pleasant woody shores. It has a single island, upon which I landed, caused some trees to be felled, and hoisted the national flag. I left this flag flying, and proceeded down the N. W. or main fork. A descent of about 180 miles brought us back to our party at Red Cedar, a Cape lake.⁹

Very respectfully, dear sir,
Your friend & obed't serv't,
H. R. SCHOOLCRAFT, I. A.

THE NUMERALS ON THE KENSINGTON RUNE STONE

The numerical symbols on the Kensington rune stone have received surprisingly little attention from critics. These symbols are **ᚠ**, **ᚡ**, **ᚢ**, **ᚣ**, **ᚤ**, and **ᚥ**. Ole Worm has shown that these correspond to 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 10, respectively.¹ Worm gives the symbol for 10 as **ᚦ**, but we may well accept **ᚥ** as a variant, since it carries out a similar system of doubling.

It is apparent that the system of forming these numerical symbols is very similar to that of forming Roman numerals, and that it is basically different from the Arabic numeral

⁸ The two preceding sentences vary considerably in *Niles' Register*, where they read: "We ascended the former, through a number of lakes, to its source, in a small creek; being an inlet into a lake. From thence we made a portage of six miles, with our canoes, into *La Biche* or *Ibasca* [*sic*] lake, — (the latter being a derivative from *veritas caput*), which is the true source of this celebrated stream, being at the same time its most northern head."

⁹ In *Niles' Register*, the last three words have been corrected to read, "or Cass Lake."

¹ Ole Worm, *Fasti Danici* (Copenhagen, 1643). Worm's plate is reproduced in Hjalmar R. Holand, *The Kensington Stone*, 185 (Ephraim, Wisconsin, 1932).



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).