

## White Lake Nearly Was Chalk Lake

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*Undated aerial view of White Lake*

Do you know that White River was once called Chalk River, and that might easily have been its name today. In which case White Lake the Beautiful would have been Chalk Lake the Beautiful, for the lake takes its name from the river.

This would have been the case if the earlier of the two names by which the French designated this river had been handed down to us, instead of the second name, by which they knew it.

The early French maps of western Michigan use either the term La Rivierre Croy or La Rivierre Blanche to designate White River. The first means Chalk River and the second White River. To just what accident of history we owe the circumstance that the second name was preserved instead of the first we may never know, but there is an interesting speculation.

These two old French names were literal translations of two old Indian names of this river. One was "Wau-be-gun-guesh-cup-a-go," and the other was "Wau-bish-sippi." The one translated means "a river with white clay in its banks," and the other means "a river whose water is white." The white clay

and the white water both have reference to the unusual circumstance that there were large deposits of white marl underneath the bed of the river just inside of its old “mouth”. These are easily seen in the bed of the Old Channel today in the vicinity of the Cement Bridge and Indian Point. The white clay is, of course, white marl – in other words, chalk.

The name La Rivierre La Croy, or Chalk River, is a translation of “Wau-be-gun-guesh-cup-a-go.” In other words, the origin of these arises from the presence of marl beds that lined the banks of the Old Channel. The other Indian name “Waubishsippi,” owes its origin to the fact that the current or the swift river as it passed over these marl beds caused erosion and the river was colored white, or chalky. And as the current flowed out into the big lake this whitish coloration must have stood out in such contrast to the deep blues and the greens of the big lake as to lead the Indians to hail this stream as “a river whose water was white.”

We know that different Indian tribes occupied western Michigan, even after its exploration and settlement by the white man. It may be, therefore, that one of these Indian tribes used one of these names to designate this river, and that another tribe used the other. The Pottawatomies were driven out of the state by the Neutral Indians about 1642. They came back and re-occupied western Michigan a century later, and were again driven out, this time by the Ottawas, and this time to the south, into southern Michigan and Illinois.

The last two syllables of the word “Wau-bish-sippi” lead to an interesting speculation as to the tribal connection between this name and the name “Mississippi.” The one means “white river” and the other means “great river,” or, as we more poetically say, “father of waters.” Did the same tribe name both of these rivers, and was that tribe the Pottawatomies, who occupied both western Michigan and upper Illinois? The only other river we know of that has this same ending is the Sinissippi River, in Illinois. May we infer from all this that the name Waubishsippi is of Pottawatomie origin, and that the other, “Wau-be-gun-guesh-cup-a-go,” owns its origin to the tribe that drove the Pottawatomies out of the state, and that occupied western Michigan from about 1650 to 1750, or during that century when the early French were making their exploration and map-making of the east shore?

In other words, supposing there had been no massacre at Indian Point, or destruction of the Indian village that we know stood at the head of the ravine that runs through White River Township, down into the Old Channel, what then would have been the name of this lake, Chalk Lake or White Lake?

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