

A Brief Explanation Of The Roots Of The Name POTAPSKUT

Submitted by Bill Eareckson via T. Marshall Duer, Jr.

Mr. Commodore, fellow-skipper and gentlemen:

When I suggested the name which has since been adopted for our Association, I did not do so on the basis of any profound knowledge of Maryland place-names or Maryland history or Maryland Indians. It was one of the scattered bits of local lore that I had picked up. I have since consulted the best sources available, including Mr. William B. Marye, who is generally acknowledged to be the best qualified authority on such matters in the state.

I was just asked for a sketch of the derivation of the name. However, this simple discussion is to be postponed a bit and made somewhat incidental because I have since been given to understand that the 'sketch' was meant to include the entire background of the name, with attention to such angles as the Maryland Indians, the appearance of the name on early maps, et cetera. In short, I had stuck my neck out: I was to deal not only with etymology but also with the anthropology, geology, archaeology, cosmography, geography and sundry other branches of knowledge. Our considerate Secretary told me that a paper taking a half hour "would be enough". I won't repeat my answer, but I'm sure you'll all applaud me for failing to fulfill that specification. Nevertheless, I will summarize briefly the general background before discussing the actual derivation of the name and will bring in some incidental facts which I believe will be of interest to you as natives of this region and explorers of nearby sections: you may find new charm in sailing if you have in mind some historical sidelights relating to these particular waters and shores.

The famous adventurer-soldier-sailor-explorer-planter Capt. John Smith was the first white man known to have sailed into the Maryland part of the Chesapeake Bay. His account and map of the entire upper Bay were remarkably well done; and the map, at least, was not surpassed for about a century, although several other men attempted the job.

His map was published at Oxford (England) in 1612, but was based on a voyage of exploration in two installments made four years earlier. The work was founded almost entirely on two short expeditions in 1608. On the first one, he left Jamestown on June 2nd, his ship being, he said, "an open barge neare three tuns burthen." He got up as far as the Patapsco about the end of the first week in June, lay off the present site of Baltimore for a day or two, then explored the Potomac River before arriving back at Jamestown on July 21st. In seven weeks he had explored 1000 miles of shoreline and made several land strips.

It was on this trip that he named the Patapsco; he called it the Bolus River. The word "bolus" is Latin, meaning 'clay'. In common English usage at that period, it was restricted to a certain group of clays varying in color from yellow, red or brown to black, the color being due to proportions of iron. Erosion had already stripped our present Federal Hill of a large part of its covering of vegetation, so that when Smith saw this prominent physical feature, commanding the reaches of what is now our harbor, he was reminded of a huge mound of bole armoniak, or what modern pharmacists call "Armenian clay" used in cosmetics -- a pale red due to a high proportion of iron oxides. Accordingly, he named the site "Bulus", and later extended the name to the entire river on which it was located.

That the name was justified is obvious not only from the presence of such clay as we can still see it along the river, but also from the fact that its banks were profitably mined for iron for several decades in the 17th and 18th centuries (a big factor in the erosion which, together with a change of the water-shed further upstream, caused the rapid filling-in of the entire river and the end of navigability above the harbor).

It is interesting to note in passing that the first of those iron mines was owned and worked by John Moale at Moale's Point, along Spring Gardens. The City of Baltimore was to have been founded at that point but Moale didn't want his mine encumbered by a surrounding town, so he brought pressure to bear on the Assembly, with the result that that site was not used for the new town.

There is no indication that Capt. Smith ever heard the name Potapskut -- and this is not strange, for he states that he found no inhabitants or habitations on the western shore between the Patuxent and the Susquehanna. Smith's map was the first one to indicate our Rock Creek, with an approximation of the correct course, but giving no name and no details of the shoreline.

The first map on which the Patapsco was called by its present name was that published by Alsop in 1666. The name had however, been applied to it before that. Mr. Marye says he has seen the name in a record of permit

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The name was undoubtedly bestowed by the Indians and adopted by the settlers without regard for the meaning, like all Indian names which have been retained. Similarly, the Pawtuxent of John Smith described an Indian town 'at the falls on a tidal stream', and not the river itself. This latter name appears in Rhode Island as Pawtucket, showing that the names in Maryland and Virginia are very closely related to those of the Naragansett and Massachusetts tribes, and like them, belong to the Algonquian language.

This etymology Patapskut or Potapskut (19 variations in spelling are commonly mentioned) as meaning 'at the jutting rock' is in accordance with Algonquian ideas and is easily identified. Its prefix pota is found in another Maryland name, the Potopaco of Capt. Smith (now Port Tobacco) - 'a jutting of the water inland' - i.e., 'a bay'.

The second element - psk is very persistent in all dialects of the family, and is an inseparable generic appearing in compound words only, with very little variation. It is used in such words as Chippipsk or Chippisquit, 'a separate rock', (chippi meaning 'separate'); Purnipsk, 'along a rock', et cetera. Examples can be quoted quite numerously.

The locative ut is common in all dialects, and sometimes it has been dropped entirely by use in the alien tongue, like the name Montauk, which originally was Meantank-ut. It sometimes is found as -et, -ot, -oot, etc.

The above will give some idea as to how the modern etymology of the name was determined. And now arises the question of identification: what was the locality called Potapskut, the name of which in course of time was extended to the entire River? To anyone familiar with the River near its outlet into the Bay, the question may seemingly be satisfactorily answered at once. Is not Potapskut the "White Rocks", so well known to local fishermen of this and many past generations - that group of limestone rocks jutting out of the River at the Juncture of Rock Creek and the Patapsco? Today they are a prominent natural feature in a river whose bed is mainly mud and sand, and whose banks are clay bluffs.

In past centuries - say, when the red men held sway and the white men had not yet come - they rose higher out of the water and showed themselves above the surface over a larger area. Geologists have pointed out that the "White Rocks" are steadily disintegrating under weather conditions and chemical action, and also make the observation that they are the outcropping of a stratum which extends across the river and which may have been above the water in bygone days at points other than the "White Rocks". In every essential, apparently, our 'white rocks' answer to the Indian "Potapskut"; it was just such a natural object as an Indian would name so that it could be identified easily. The extension of the name to designate the entire River would also be very plausible, for that is a process the white pioneers used to give us hundreds of other names in American geography.

We have seen above some examples of this process of extension of names - viz., 'Patuxent' and 'Potopaco'. The proper translation of these was dependent in part of a reading of John Smith's account. The same is true of the Potomac and Susquehanna. Potomac was originally Patawomeke and was the designation applied not to the river, but to the tribe Smith found on the Virginia banks and which Leonard Calvert later encountered when the Ark and Dove arrived. Separated into its parts it is Patow-, 'to bring again': -om, 'go': -eke, 'people': literally 'the people who go and bring again' - freely translated, 'the people who travel and trade'. The Potomac Indians sold the output of a deposit of alumbage to other tribes far and near, and the latter used the product to paint their bodies, faces, and emblems. Some of these purchasers told Smith the natives they saw along the river were 'trading Indians', but Smith interpreted their words as being the name of the river itself. The Massawomekes whom Smith met in the upper Chesapeake and described at some length have a name of similar derivation: they were 'the people who come and go in great canoes'. (It would be interesting to know what those 'great canoes' looked like, wouldn't it?)

Susquehanna, too, was not the Indian name for the River, but was derived from the name of the Susquehannocks, the tribe that dwelt along its banks. Smith had a Tockwogh Indian guide (native of the Sassafras River Section) when he met the Susquehannocks. The latter had, so Smith narrates, hatchets, knives and pieces of iron and brass, which according to investigators, they had captured from some more northern people who got these articles of European manufacture from the French in Canada. "Who are these people?" asked Smith, and his guide replied, "They are the Sasquesa-Nanoughs ('the people with the booty obtained in war')".

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The name Nanticoke is said to have been Nai - tagu - ack originally, and meant 'a point of land on a tidewater stream' - i.e., the village where Smith first encountered these Eastern Shore Indians.

The present-day scholar's explanation of the naming of our Bay is another interesting case in point. It goes back to a period antedating that of Capt. Smith, for the Chesapeake was so recorded on maps before the Jamestown colony. Again we have a case where the name of the Seat of an Indian tribe has been greatly extended. Originally, the word was K'che-sepi-ack, and was furnished to the first English colonists in America as the designation of a tribe living on the Elizabeth River which, as we know, sepu, 'a river'; and -ack was a locative signifying 'and' or 'place' or 'country'. So that the K'chesepiack Indians were the Indians living 'at the place on the great river' - Elizabeth River being 'the great river' to its immediate Indian neighbors. From this small and obscure tribe the name, with the aid of 16th century map-makers, became affixed to the whole Bay.

When I last talked to Mr. Marye on the subject of the Patapsco, he ventured the opinion that while the ledge of rocks referred to might well be the 'White Rocks', as is generally accepted now, he nevertheless would not dismiss the possibility that the reference was to the cliffs on the River either just above the Relay or further up at the falls. It seems fairly well established that the Old Indian Trail ran from the Great Gunpowder Falls to the falls on the Patapsco, and that the Indians used the vicinities of both falls as workshops for making arrowheads, hatchets, and other stone weapons and implements. It would have been natural for them to give such a name to such a place. And in addition, old manuscripts often refer to Elk Ridge Landing (just below the cliffs at the Relay) as Patapsco.

However, these were not the Indians who mingled much with the whites. It seems more likely that the name was given to an early white explorer or settler by an Indian guide brought up from Southern Maryland, the Eastern Shore, or Virginia. If this were the case, the reference more likely would be to the White Rocks, and would have been made very naturally; when the white man asked the guide, "What's the name of that?" pointing at the river's mouth, the Indian having no name for the river in general, would have said, "The river at the jutting out of the ledge of rock."

It may be disheartening to have to leave the matter not entirely settled, but so little is accurately known of the Maryland Indians, and particularly of their language, that we must be satisfied. We must remember that the toughest piece of written Indian language in existence, from this whole section, is Father White's translation into a local Indian dialect of the Lord's Prayer: for the rest, students have generally only isolated words and phrases to work with. At least, the way things stand at present indicates that the meaning and identification we want for the name of our Association is the one most acceptable from the scholar's viewpoint.

In closing, I know of nothing more appropriate than a quotation from the pen of Mapmaker George Alsop, the above-mentioned. In the work in which his map appeared, he addressed the Dedication to Caecilius, (2nd) Lord Baltimore - the last few lines of which might well be my own at this particular point: "...If I have wrote or composed anything that's wilde and confused, it is because I am so myself, and the world, as far as I can perceive, is not much out of the same trim; therefore I resolve, if I am brought to the Bar of Common Law for anything I have done here, to pleade Non Compos Mentis, to save my Bacon. . ."

William W. Eareckson

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