

## THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME IOWA.

BY BENJAMIN F. SHAMBAUGH, PH. D.

The origin of the name "Iowa" is, of course, not the most important problem addressed to the student of Iowa history. And yet a satisfactory answer to the question, How came the name to be applied to this Commonwealth? is certainly worthy the effort involved in collecting and weighing the evidences.

The name "Iowa" as applied to the State which was admitted into the Union on December 28th, 1846, was beyond all doubt derived from or suggested by the use of the name in the expression, "Territory of Iowa." For the "Territory of Iowa" was the direct and immediate historical precursor in time and space of the "State of Iowa."

As the name "Iowa" in the expression "State of Iowa" was derived from or suggested by its use in the earlier expression "Territory of Iowa," so the name "Iowa" in the expression "Territory of Iowa" was derived from or suggested by its use in the still earlier expression "Iowa District." For the "Iowa District" was the direct and immediate historical precursor in time and space of the "Territory of Iowa."

It is now generally conceded that the expression "Iowa District," as applicable to the country that afterwards became the Territory and then the State of Iowa, came into general and recognized use through the publication, in 1836, of a small volume entitled, "Notes on Wisconsin Territory, With a Map," by Lieutenant Albert M. Lea. It cannot, of course, be said with absolute certainty, that the name "Iowa District" was used for the first time in this little book. On the contrary it is altogether probable that this was not the case. But since the name was fixed and made generally prevalent through the publication of Lieutenant Lea's book and map, it is proper and accurate to say that Lieutenant Lea

is the father of the expression "Iowa District." Thus the problem of the origin of the name "Iowa" is resolved into the question, How came Lieutenant Lea to apply the term "Iowa District" to the country which now constitutes the Commonwealth of Iowa?

To this question but one answer has thus far been given. It is this: in the year 1834 Congress attached the country in question to and made it a part of the Territory of Michigan. Thereupon the Legislative Council of the Territory of Michigan, assembled in extra session in September of the same year, passed an act relative to the establishment of local government in the recently added country. By this act the country west of the Mississippi was divided into two parts by a line drawn due west from the lower end of Rock Island to the Missouri river. All the country north of this line, to which the Indian title had been extinguished, was to constitute the county of Dubuque; all south of the line was to constitute the county of Demoine. Furthermore, it was provided by the same act that all laws in force in the "county of Iowa" (Michigan Territory) should extend to and be in force in the counties of Dubuque and Demoine, and that process civil and criminal and writs of error should lie from the Circuit Court of the United States for the "county of Iowa" to the county courts of Dubuque and Demoine. Now this "county of Iowa" with which the original counties of Dubuque and Demoine were thus associated, had been established by the Legislative Council of Michigan in 1829, within that part of the Territory which afterwards became the State of Wisconsin.

Now it is said, in answer to the question, How came Lieutenant Lea by the name "Iowa" as used in the expression "Iowa District?" that it was derived from or suggested by the use of the term in the expression "county of Iowa." This explanation, now generally accepted, of the origin of the name "Iowa" may be called the "Iowa County Explanation." And we must admit that it is altogether plausible: since the original counties of Dubuque and Demoine were

directly associated with the county of Iowa through the Michigan statute of 1834.

Some recent investigations, however, lead me to discredit the "Iowa County Explanation," and to propose in its stead what may appropriately be called the "Iowa River Explanation." This proposed explanation asserts that the name "Iowa" in the expression "Iowa District" was derived from or suggested by the use of the name in the expression "Iowa River." The historical evidence upon which this explanation of the origin of the name "Iowa" is based appears to me to be adequate and convincing.

In the first place we have the direct testimony of Lieutenant Lea, the father of the expression "Iowa District." He says in Chapter I of his "Notes on Wisconsin Territory:" "Hence the District under review has been often called 'Scott's Purchase,' and it is sometimes called the 'Blackhawk Purchase;' but from the extent and beauty of the Iowa river which runs centrally through the District, and gives character to most of it, the name of that stream being both euphonic and appropriate has been given to the District itself."

The evidence from Lieutenant Lea's book is rendered still more certain and conclusive (if that were possible) by the testimony of Mr. I. N. Nicollet. While Lieutenant Lea was collecting the materials for his book and map, Mr. Nicollet was engaged in making a thorough exploration of the basin of the upper Mississippi. As a result of his work, Mr. Nicollet constructed a geographical and topographical map\* of the country explored. This map together with a "report intended to illustrate" the same was published by the Government of the United States in 1845 as House Document No. 52.†

It is in this report that Mr. Nicollet refers to the origin of the name "Iowa". In speaking of the lands acquired from

\*A copy of this map may be found in the map department of the Library of Congress.

†See Executive Documents of the Second Session of the Twenty-eighth Congress, Volume II, Document No. 52.

the Indians by the treaty of 1832, he says: "It was often called 'Scott's Purchase;' as also the 'Black Hawk Purchase,' after the name of the Indian leader during the outbreak alluded to. But, in 1836, my friend Albert M. Lea, Esq., then a lieutenant of dragoons, published a map and description of the country, which he called the 'Iowa District'—a name both euphonic and appropriate, being derived from the Iowa river, the extent, beauty, and importance of which were then first made known to the public."\*

As to the origin of the name "Iowa" as applied to the river very little can be said. However, a study of the early maps† of this western country shows that for at least a century before Lieutenant Lea published his map, the river that "runs centrally" through Iowa was generally indicated by the name "Ioway."

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE NAME "IOWA."

- "Iowa," by C. W. Irish, *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. I, p. 13.  
 "Iowa," *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. I, p. 71.  
 "Iowa, Its Original Meaning," *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. I, p. 135.  
 "Origin of the Name Iowa," by Samuel Murdock, *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. XII, p. 458.  
 "Hon. Joseph Williams," by T. S. Parvin, *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. XII, p. 388.  
 "Iowa," *ANNALS OF IOWA*, Vol. X, p. 234.  
 "Iowa," by Samuel Prentis Curtis, *ANNALS OF IOWA*, Vol. X, p. 286.  
 "The Name 'Iowa,'" by W. H. Hildreth, *ANNALS OF IOWA*, Vol. I, p. 268.  
 "The Word 'Iowa'—What Does It Mean," by L. F. Andrews, *ANNALS OF IOWA*, Third Series, Vol. II, p. 465.  
 "History and Civil Government of Iowa," by H. H. Scerley and W. L. Parish, pp. 27, 28.  
 "Notes on Wisconsin Territory, With a Map," by Lieutenant Albert M. Lea, Ch. I.  
 "Report," by I. N. Nicollet, *Executive Documents*, Second Session, Twenty-eighth Congress, Document No. 52, p. 73.  
 "Organizing the County of Iowa," *ANNALS OF IOWA*, Third Series, Vol. III, p. 224.  
 "A Rare Book," *ANNALS OF IOWA*, Third Series, Vol. III, p. 473.

\*See *Executive Documents* Second Session of the Twenty-eighth Congress, Vol. II, Document No. 52, p. 73.

†An excellent collection of these maps may be found in the Library of Congress.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa 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. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.