

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XX

ISSUED IN NOVEMBER 1939

NO. 11

COPYRIGHT 1939 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



Land of the Fire Makers

Worshippers of the sun and thunder were the warlike Mascoutens. French explorers were wont to call them the *Nation du Feu* or the "Fire Nation". Their Indian cousins, the Chippewa and the Foxes, were inclined to designate them as the "little prairie people". From the day when Champlain first heard of them in 1616 the Mascoutens were continually at war with their neighbors: in 1640 they fought the Iroquoian Neutrals; in 1712 they were almost annihilated by the Potawatomi at Detroit; by 1728 they had been driven across the Mississippi. The journals of such men as Radisson and Perrot, Hennepin and Marquette, all bear testimony to the courage and belligerent character of the Mascoutens.

It was while sojourning near the mouth of the Iowa River that the Mascoutens probably became identified with a low, flat, sandy tract of land containing nearly forty thousand acres known to-day as Muscatine Island. Returning to their old

homes on the Fox River in Wisconsin, the Mascoutens were last mentioned in the white man's annals in 1779. After this they mysteriously vanished from history: incessant warfare had so depleted their ranks that they were probably absorbed by stronger tribes, the Sauks and Foxes in the north and the Kickapoo in southern Illinois.

Although the "fire people" or "little prairie people" had disappeared, the early American explorers continued to associate their name with the region around present-day Muscatine. When Major Thomas Forsyth journeyed up the Mississippi in 1819, he pitched his camp at the "upper end of Grand Mascoutin" within the modern limits of Muscatine. The following year Stephen Watts Kearny passed "Prairie Island", which he reported to be ten miles long. In the spring of 1823, when Giacomo C. Beltrami ascended the Mississippi in the steamboat *Virginia*, he estimated that the head of "Grande Prairie Mascotin" was thirty-three miles above the mouth of the Iowa River. By 1836 Lieutenant Albert M. Lea was writing with easy familiarity of "Muscatine Slue" and the "swamps" of "Muscatine Island".

On December 7, 1836, Governor Henry Dodge approved a bill of the Wisconsin Territorial legislature dividing Demoine County into eight counties, one of which was named "Musquitine". The

same act provided that district court should be held "in the town of Bloomington, in the county of Musquitine, on the fourth Monday in April and September in each year." On January 18, 1838, the modern spelling of Muscatine was used when the present-day boundaries of Muscatine County were established.

A Muscatine editor asked Antoine Le Claire in 1852 for a definition of the word Muscatine. The swarthy French-Indian replied that Muscatine "is a sort of combination of an Indian and French word: mus-quo-ta, the Indian word, means 'prairie'; the French added the termination *tine* to mus-quo-ta, and the compound word musquo, or musquitine, means 'little prairie'. The Indian word *menis* means 'island', *ashcota* means 'fire', *musquaw* means 'red'. The Indians used to call the island Mus-quo-ta-menis, which means 'prairie island'."

Muscatine antiquarians preferred a more realistic interpretation, pointing out that "fire island" more nearly fitted the spectacular prairie fires that yearly swept the island. Muscatine — whether it means fire island, prairie island, makers of fire, or prairie people — should invoke a kaleidoscopic panorama of color and action in the mind of any one who knows the origin of the name.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN