

WHAT DOES CHAUTAUQUA MEAN AND WHERE DID THE NAME COME FROM?

Chautauqua is, by far, the most widely known of all our local names. The lake gave its name to the county and then to Chautauqua Institution. Chautauqua Institution gave the name to its geographic location, formerly Fair Point (changed by state law in 1877), then to similar institutions, the "Daughter Chautauquas." Still later, promoters adopted the name for the widespread tent or traveling chautauquas (from July 1, 1904 to September 1, 1932). Chautauqua had become a household word with a small c.

All sorts of products including farm machinery, coffee, and pianos have used the Chautauqua name. Three steamboats on our lake, including the first steamer on the lake (as Chautauque), and a Coast Guard cutter on the high seas (<https://www.history.uscg.mil/Browse-by-Topic/Assets/Water/All/Article/2343088/chautauqua-1945-wpgwhec-41/>) have been named Chautauqua.

Former Chautauquans named Chautauqua County, Kansas and Chautauqua in Day County, South Dakota. There are Chautauqua Hills in Oklahoma. There are other Chautauqua Lakes in Minnesota, Illinois, and Florida. One of the least known occurrences of the name, and perhaps the most puzzling in terms of origin, is the Chautauqua Valley in the Allegany County Town of Grove. It alone was named well before the creation and fame of Chautauqua Institution. There was a post office of that name December 7, 1850 to November 2, 1863. I have a photo of a contemporary road sign.

We know some people were seeking the meaning of the name as early as 1815. There are about ten major contenders.

PURPORTED MEANINGS OF CHAUTAUQUA

Pack tied in the middle/Two moccasins - Attributed by Samuel Brown (May 4, 1843, lecture published in the Jamestown Journal), on the say-so of William Peacock, to Horatio Jones and Jasper Parrish, the two predominant Seneca translators of the post-Revolutionary era. Both grew up as captives.

Where the fish was taken out - Attributed to Dr. Peter Wilson (a Cayuga raised

Seneca, died 1871), considered to have been the most highly educated Indian in western New York in the early 19th century. Reported to Obed Edson by Orsamus Marshall, the premier Buffalo historian. Edson favored this theory. It was associated with a story about the Indians unintentionally introducing Muskellunge to Lake Erie from Lake Chautauqua. The story is biologically implausible.

Place of easy death - Several sources at least as far back as the poetry of William H. C. Hosmer of Avon about 1854. Alluded to by Cornplanter in his December 1, 1790 speech to George Washington. Associated with various versions of a story about eating a poisonous root, probably the wild parsnip (*Cicuta* sp.), a common method of suicide among Iroquois women. The Victorians developed this into some fancy tales. (Some printings of the Cornplanter speech erroneously refer to Chateaugay rather than Chautauqua. Chateaugay is in Franklin County. No connection to Chautauqua Lake.)

Where the child was lost - various versions and stories. Obviously related to the following entry.

Where one was taken up - Timothy Alden 1825. Associated with a Seneca story about a child being killed on the lake shore by a tornado.

A foggy place - Otshataka. Advanced by gazetteer publisher William Spafford. He questioned 15 Senecas in 1815. First published in his state gazetteer 1824 edition where he spells Chautauqua with a final a. (Chatauqua in the 1813 edition.) Emory Warren in the first published history of Chautauqua County in 1846 favors this meaning probably deriving it from Spafford.

Eponym. The lake was represented as the body of a maiden with the narrows as a spear in her side. A localization of a universal folklore motif elaborated by the Victorians. However, usually, but not always, the maiden was given another name that didn't sound like Chautauqua. (See Susan Pulver Blodgett, Eleanor Dow, Mabel Powers.)

Jottica - A tribe named on a Dutch map of 1616. Theory of General John S. Clarke, 1871, published by Louise Wells Murray, 1908, *A History of Old Tioga Point and Early Athens, Pennsylvania*.

Chetaqua - a tribe on the Neus River in North Carolina, neighbors to the Tuscarora who moved north to join the Iroquois Confederacy in 1722. The earliest statement of this theory I have found is in the DAR Magazine in 1915. Official Institution historian Alfreda Irwin (1913-2000) supported this theory as does the current archivist, Jon

Schmitz.

Cat and **water** French term derived from *Chaut*, cat, for Nation of the Cat, the Eries, supposedly resident in the area, and *aqua*, Latin for water. Theory of the late Alvin Hoag and several contemporary amateur ethnohistorians. From a telephone interview of Hoag, 1980's.

Starting in the late 1930's, William Fenton, who became the 20th century's most distinguished Iroquoianist did extensive field work among the local Senecas. Then and later he worked in concert with Merle Deardorff from Warren, Pa. In the mid 1950's Helen McMahon interviewed Deardorff and took notes on index card sized scraps of paper in her difficult handwriting. Those notes now reside in an obscure corner of the Fenton History Center archives. There, based both on early 19th century and mid-20th century informants, we find additional possible meanings: a body was taken out (supposedly told by Cornplanter to James Prendergast), a debarking place, look here's a baby, a basin between hills.

Poet William Hosmer of Avon in the 1850's was the first to create romantic stories in the Victorian tradition around the various supposed meanings of the name. With the flowering of the Victorian era and the ascendance of Chautauqua Institution, he was followed by Susan Blodget Pulver (in her strange little book *Legends of Chautauqua* 1895, Eleanor Jones Dow (in the Women's Edition of the Jamestown Journal, July 4, 1895 for example), local journalist, George Byrne Smith (in various editions of the *Cicerone* promotional booklets for the Erie Railroad) and in the early 20th century, Mabel Powers (*The Portage Trail* 1924) among others.

So when does the name Chautauqua first occur in history? When is Chautauqua Lake first recorded? Are these the same question? They are not.

The first record of any form of the name Chautauqua appears on a 1740 map. In 1739 a force of 123 French and 319 Indians from Montreal passed over Chautauqua Lake on its way to fight in the Chickasaw War in the southern Mississippi basin. Eighteen year old Joseph Gaspard Chaussegros de Lery, a member of that expedition, drew a map that appeared the next year with Hiatackoun on it.

When the French were contemplating the monumental task of putting this force through the Chautauqua region, it was obvious they already knew that the portage and the lake were here. There is no sense of it being a new discovery. De Lery's father was a competent engineer and map maker with long experience (13 years) at Fort

Niagara. He would certainly have collected information from Indians and traders, as would others in authority in French Canadian circles.

A letter written by Marquis de Beauharnois (the governor of Canada) to Comte de Maurepas (French Minister of the Marine, which was the branch of royal government responsible for colonies) on June 10, 1739, just days before the expedition departed from Montreal, says, "They are taking the Belle River route which they will reach thirty leagues south of Niagara, at a portage, four leagues long, which leads to Lake Ste. Croix." That's Lake Holy Cross. Holy Cross was a name bestowed widely by the 17th and 18th century Catholic French. Was there any special reason to give Chautauqua Lake that name? Perhaps.

Going back in time now. Despite a number of things you can see in history books, especially concerning Etienne Brule and Rene-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, I suspect the first time any Frenchman saw Chautauqua Lake was probably 1724, some unnamed trader. That's the first Frenchman. Obviously a lot of Indians had been here earlier. Cartier in 1534 and 1535, out near the mouth of the Saint Lawrence river, might possibly have talked to Indians who knew of Chautauqua Lake but if they did, they wouldn't have mentioned it and Cartier wouldn't have understood. It is more likely that Samuel de Champlain, as early as 1603, and very likely by 1615, had talked to Indians who knew about or had even passed over the Chautauqua portage, but we can't be sure. In 1668 at his home near Montreal it is probable that La Salle heard about Chautauqua Lake. Senecas were around all summer and La Salle was planning an exploration of the Ohio River. He pumped them for information. He certainly would have heard about Chautauqua Lake the next summer in the main Seneca village where he unsuccessfully tried to hire guides to the Ohio. On September 21, 1669 at a village at the west end of Lake Ontario, La Salle was given a Shawnee slave who became his lifelong companion. This man, Nica, would certainly have known and probably had passed over Chautauqua Lake. That could make him the first man in history whose name we know who had likely been to Chautauqua Lake.

La Salle, again despite what many history books tell you, never made his trip to the Ohio. But it is puzzling, maybe even troubling, that information from Nica by way of La Salle doesn't start to show up about Chautauqua Lake soon after this. Even earlier, in the 1650's, the maps of Nicholas Sanson (especially his maps of 1650 and 1656) were showing little unnamed lakes south and southeast of Lake Erie. They drained into Lake Erie. This may or may not reflect some uncertain knowledge acquired somehow about Chautauqua Lake confused with knowledge of Cattaraugus Creek. (Probably not relevant, but Cattaraugus Creek drains out of tiny Java Lake.) It was the 1680's when French maps drawing on information from La Salle began to show a

Lake Oniasont with many varied spellings and draining south. This may or may not have been Chautauqua Lake. In 1668 and 1669 La Salle had heard about the Honiasontkeronons the tribe that gave its name to the lake. Oniasontke may have meant something to do with gorgets, roughly cross shaped ornaments, worn around the neck. Or maybe it just meant crooked squash. Honiasontke was also the Seneca name for the mythical distant sunset land.

There is a great deal of complex and uncertain literature trying to identify the Honiasontkeronons and other tribes listed on those late 17th century French maps. Some of it links them to the Eries through interpretations and references to a people who wore gorgets around their necks. The Eries were obliterated and Chautauqua County depopulated in 1656, but information, including that on maps, usually had a time lag in the 17th century.

In any event, after de Lery's map in 1740, Lake Oniasont all but disappears from subsequent maps and Chautauqua in various forms becomes common.

Deardorff advanced the theory that Chautauqua is not originally a Seneca or even Iroquoian word. He notes that the French allies, such as those in the 1739-40 expedition, were almost entirely various Algonquian people including the Abenaki. Deardorf thought the Abenaki name for the lake was Chetaucuab, rendered Chetaucua in Seneca. He did not venture a meaning for Chetaucuab. Deardorff did not make a connection between the gorgets worn by people who possibly were Eries and the cross of Ste. Croix, but some might. (See James Pendergast, (not Prendergast) *Massawomeck: Raiders and Traders into the Chesapeake Bay in the Seventeenth Century*, Transactions, American Philosophical Society (vol. 81, part 2) for more on gorgets and name confusion.)

William Fenton for his part published his place names research serially in issues of the *Pennsylvania Archaeologist* until only one more installment was planned. It was to cover Chautauqua and other names this side of the state line. But it never appeared. I wrote to him in 1987 and he explained that the outbreak of World War II had prevented publication. He speculated that the French picked the name up from Mohawks and he explicitly dismissed the Bag Tied in the Middle meaning. In 1992 Fenton wrote me he had consulted the 20th century's two leading experts on the Seneca and Iroquoian languages, Wallace G. Chafe and his wife Mariane Mithun. "I brought along my field notes of 1942 with Seneca informants on the Allegany Reservation of the Seneca Nation of Indians. (I happen to have carbon copies of the typed notes which I am enclosing.) We three discussed the placename at length without

resolving it into meaningful form. It is clearly Iroquoian and Seneca, but it must be eroded from some longer form that, if it could be recovered from documents, might yield to analysis.”

If the four most informed people of the 20th century could not agree or reach a conclusion, I will not venture one myself and I suggest treating with skepticism anyone who does.

APPENDIX A Spelling

Lewis Henry Morgan and Obed Edson among others collected about 25 spellings of Chautauqua. I have found over 50. Individual surveyors, cartographers, and office staff of the Holland Land Company spelled the name by personal preference. The modern spelling, with the final a, appeared several times well before the official revision of 1859. Examples would be Horatio Spafford’s Chatauqua in his 1813 gazetteer and the fully modern Chautauqua in the 1824 edition. The very concept of a correct spelling of any word originated with early printers in the 16th century and was in the final stages of consolidation in the 18th century. In fact, agreement on the best spelling of proper names from unwritten languages has still not been achieved today.

The official Chautauque spelling standardization dates from a petition in 1803 when Joseph Ellicott, chief agent of the Holland Land Company in western New York, used it when the Town of Chautauque was organized from the Town of Batavia in Genesee County. The spelling was carried over to the town and county names in the law of 1808 that established Chautauque County

<https://chqgov.com/county-historian/1808-session-law-chautauque-county>.

The story of Judge Foot’s successful lobbying of the county Board of Supervisors to change the spelling is well known. (Tuesday, October 11, 1859, 8 A.M., first published on pages 8 and 9 of the *Journal of the*

Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Chautauqua County, 1859)
He pointed out that people outside the area, including other legislators in Albany mispronounced the name more often than not. They often pronounced it Chautauk. It is rarely noted however, that Foote identified a particular clerk in Joseph Ellicott's office as contriving the original Chautauque ending. The man was a Harvard graduate with classical training that influenced his orthography.

The first post office in what is now Chautauqua County was established in 1806 in Westfield under the name Chautaugque. The first post office at Chautauqua Institution was established July 25, 1877 as Fair Point and changed to Chautauqua February 24, 1879 in conjunction with a state law redesignating the geographical name of the place.

For the record, George Washington spelled the name the same way as the post office, Chautaugque, in a letter October 31, 1788 to William Irvine.

It should also be pointed out that Chadakoin is just another 18th century French variant spelling of Chautauqua. However, that spelling does not persist anywhere in the 19th century until June 18, 1889 when the newly formed Chadakoin Boat Club adopted the name – and had to explain. The Chautauqua Lake outlet, which until then was just The Outlet, was being called the Chadakoin River by 1891.

APPENDIX B Previous and possible previous names

Lake Ste. Croix - so designated in the orders to the De Longueuil expedition June, 1739, immediately before the first variant of Chautauqua was first recorded.

Lake Oniasont (and variants) - May or may not have referred to Chautauqua Lake. Appeared on maps 1684-1739.

Lake Iabaticu – Shawnee name for the lake, James Adair 1775.

APPENDIX C Trying too hard

It is important to understand the difficulty of resolving a question like the meaning of Chautauqua. Here is a word that may be Seneca (if not Erie, Abenaki, or Mohawk) in origin. It has been filtered through the ears and mouths of numerous illiterate and literate Mohawks, Abenakis, Frenchmen, and English speakers. By the time William Fenton was interviewing old Senecas on the reservation in 1942, the Seneca language had changed to the point that an early 18th century speaker would have been unintelligible to any living Seneca.

Anyone who imagines that today we could benefit from “traditional knowledge” by going down to the reservation and asking random Senecas, should realize that except for a hand full of very old people, everyone on the reservation has learned Seneca in school as a second language and their knowledge about anything in the past is likely to have come directly or indirectly from books and the general culture the same way it comes to all of us. Add to that the phenomenon of folk etymology, the very common tendency of people to make up stories about the origin of words, especially place names, by concocting stories that make sense to them now. It looks like Fenton’s informants (Will and Phoebe Gordon and Chauncey Johnny John were named.) were making desperate efforts to be helpful with little to go on.

Other anomalous supposed meanings come up from time to time such as “the river that comes out of the ground” found on page 30 of William Dollarhide’s *New York Censuses and Substitutes* (2005). And, yes, I am aware of the joke, probably dating to the late 19th century, about the Indian fisherman complaining about his wife. “She talk, she talk, she talk.”

I have seen a powder horn with characteristic 18th century decorative carvings and inscribed “Chautauqua 1724.” I am certain it is not genuine.

APPENDIX D, local proliferation of the name

Jamestown Daily Journal, Thursday, August 7, 1879

This foolish Chautauquaing everything about the lake is making confusion worse that confounded. People at a distance wish to join friends at “Chautauqua,” and when they arrive at Mayville or Jamestown or Lake View [now Lakewood], have no idea whether their friends [are] at the “Chautauqua House” or the “Chautauqua Lake House,” or at “Point Chautauqua,” or at “Lake Chautauqua,” or at “Chautauqua;” and often the more they try to remember the more bewildered they become. The difficulty with passengers is nothing compared to the muddle that the baggage men get into handling baggage bound for points on Chautauqua Lake. Scarcely an hour passes at the three larger approaches to the lake that telegrams are not received asking in regard to stray baggage, until both passengers and baggage men are ready to surrender the task of getting the parcels to the desired Chautauqua.

Today we may find ourselves explaining to tourists or visiting relatives that Chautauqua Institution is in the Town of Chautauqua but they are not the same. Telephone answering recordings at the Town of Chautauqua tell you it is not the County of Chautauqua. Chautauqua Suites is in Mayville. Chautauqua Mall is in Lakewood, and Chautauqua Harbor is in Celoron, but Chautauqua Center is in Jamestown. Chautauqua Hardware was a manufacturer in Jamestown but

Chautauqua Brick is a hardware dealer in Bemus Point. Chautauqua Region Community Foundation is in Jamestown. Southern Chautauqua Credit Union is in Jamestown but Greater Chautauqua Credit Union is in Jamestown, Mayville, and Dunkirk. Chautauqua Area Rural Transit is in Jamestown and is now CHQ. But Chautauqua Transportation Service is in Mayville. And the Chautauqua County Antique Equipment Association, with the most Qs of any name, is in Stockton.