



What kind of name is “Des Moines” anyway?

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The exact location of the point on the Mississippi where Marquette and his party landed is not known; but from the meager description that was given, nearly all investigators agree that it must have been near where the town of Montrose now stands, in Lee County, at the head of the lower rapids. The village at which the explorers were entertained was called by the Indians *Mon-in-go-na*. Whether the same name was given to the river along which their villages were built, is not certain. Nicolet gives the following version of the matter, and of the origin and meaning of the name ‘Des Moines,’ which was given to the river by the earliest white settlers in its valley.

He writes: “The name which they gave to their settlement was *Monin-gouinas* (or *Moingona*, as laid down in the ancient maps of the country), and is a corruption of the Algonkin word *Mikouaug*, signifying ‘at the road.’ The Indians, by their customary elliptical manner of designating localities, alluding, in this instance, to the well-known road in this section of their country, which they used to follow as a communication between the head of the lower rapids and their settlement on the river that empties itself into the Mississippi to avoid the rapids. This is still the practice of the present inhabitants of the country.

“After the French had established themselves on the Mississippi they adopted this name; but with their custom (to this day that of the Creoles of only pronouncing the first syllable, and applying it to the river, as well as to the Indians who dwelt upon it, they would say ‘*la riviere des Moins*’ (‘the river of the Moins’); ‘*allez chez les Moins*’ (‘to go to the Moins’). But, in later times the inhabitants associated this name with that of the Trappist monks (*Moines de la Trappe*), who resided with the Indians of the American bottom.

“It was then concluded that the true reading of the *riviere des Moins* was the ‘*Riviere des Moins*,’ or river of monks, by which it is designated on all the modern maps.

“The Sioux or Dakotah Indians call the Des Moines *Inyan-sha-sha-watpa*, or Redstone River, from *inyan*, stone; *sha-sha*, reduplication of sha, red; and *watpa*, river. They call the upper east fork *Inyan-sha-sha-watpa sunkaku*, the brother of Redstone River.”

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