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Names for Saratoga and the Springs

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Names for Saratoga and the Springs

Abstract
For millenia, Native American peoples have been partaking of mineral waters at "Saratoga Springs" that are well known for their healing properties. The springs all had different characters: some bubbled up in surface pools; others formed cones of dried mineral deposits; others burst forth in great spouting geysers. More than forty different springs held varying degrees of carbonic acid, dissolved salts (calcium bicarbonate, magnesium bicarbonate, sodium chloride or potassium chloride), and/or iron (ferrous bicarbonate), and small amounts of sulfur (hydrogen sulfide), silica, and trace elements. The list of the healing uses for these waters is long.

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For millenia, Native American peoples have been partaking of mineral waters at “Saratoga Springs” that are well-known for their healing properties. The springs all had different characters: some bubbled up in surface pools; others formed cones of dried mineral deposits; others burst forth in great spouting geysers. More than forty different springs held varying degrees of carbonic acid, dissolved salts (calcium bicarbonate, magnesium bicarbonate, sodium chloride or potassium chloride), and/or iron (ferrous bicarbonate), and small amounts of sulfur (hydrogen sulfide), silica, and trace elements. The list of the healing uses for these waters is long.

“A tract of land called Sarachtogoe” (by the Dutch) “or by the Maquas (Mohawk) Ochseratongue or Ochsechrage, and by the Mahicanders (Mohican) Amissohaendiek.” It was bounded by two streams, the Hoosick, known to the Mohawk as Tioneendehowe (“hemlock-clad hills”) and the Batten Kill or Diononodahowe (“conical hills”).

The Mohican term Amissohaendiek roughly translates to mean “beaver-hunting territory” from amisk, the Algonkian word for beaver. The Mohawk term Ochseratongue is a variant of Oserake, apparently meaning “at the beaver dam.” These terms reflect the abundance of small streams and meadows that offered ideal beaver habitat. They also reflect the activities of the colonial era, when Mohawk and Mohican peoples were providing thousands of beaver furs for the lucrative European fur trade, and when Mohawk people started selling Mohican land.

Western Saratoga County was sold by the Mohawk in the October 6, 1704 and November 2, 1708 Kayaderosseras patent, as part of a broad tract of lands lying west of “Sarachtoga.” Kayaderosseras (a variant of Kaniatarossa) indicates “land where the lake mouths out” onto its flood plains. Kayaderoga (“at the lake”) is the Mohawk name for the land around Saratoga Lake. When Sir William Johnson was carried to High Rock Spring by his Mohawk allies on a litter in the late 1700s, he identified this place as “the spring at Kayaderosseras.”

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Historians have long debated the linguistic origins of “Saratoga,” searching for some association with the mineral springs. One proposed the Mohawk Assarat “sparkling water.” Other Mohawk suggestions include O-sah-rah-ka (“sidehills”); Soragh-aga (“salt springs”); or Saragh-aga (“swift water”). A 19th century Kahnawake Mohawk man suggested Sar-a-ta-ke (“where the prints of heels may be seen”), pointing to impressions in some of the rocks around the springs. One historian suggested Ser-ach-to-que, said to mean “floating scum upon the water.”

Scientists trace the origins of these mineral waters to ancient earth movements, reading signs still visible on the landscape. When the lands around Saratoga were once ocean shoreline, deposits of marine life and shells were compressed and transformed, over time, to limestone layered in-between metamorphic crystalline rock, shale, sandstone, and dolomite. These layers were shifted by ancient volcanoes that cracked open faults, forming fissures in the limestone. The waters that filter and flow through the rock layers mix with subterranean waters, collecting minerals and trace elements from the limestone when natural flows force them towards the surface.

Native oral traditions attributed these ancient movements of land and water to the efforts of giant earthshapers (some of whom are better known to us today as “glaciers”). Indigenous locative words identify the particular places where the feet of these earthshapers stepped or slid heavily on the land, where giant hands molded mountains and tossed rocks, and where other cataclysmic earth-shiftings took place, carving out lakes and rivers and forcing underground waters to the surface. The Native names of many of these earthshapers have been forgotten, but the results of their actions can clearly be read on the land today.

One limestone reef from the Cambrian sea 500,000 years past, for example, is visible at the “Petrified Sea Gardens” in Greenfield. Fossilized stromatolite (lime-secreting algae) that look like cross-sections of cabbages are identified in Native oral tradition as the remains of a rich garden planted by ancient ancestors. The Native story says that the sky spirits devastated the village and turned the crops to stone, as punishment for the peoples’ warlike ways. This story is an apt metaphor, since the reefs hold the remains of some of the earliest living organisms – a sort of garden – from the ancient ocean. The springs gain their medicinal properties from minerals leached from those ancient rocks. The springs have suffered in modern times, however, from the building of pipes, drains, and dams – ways of making war on natural waterways – that have caused many springs to stop flowing permanently.

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Interestingly, none of the Indian deeds or patents makes any mention of ever selling the springs, which suggests that they may have been shared in trust by the many different Native peoples who used them. Every Native nation had its own name for such sacred places. The Abenaki called the springs Nebizonbik, meaning "medicine waters." The land where the Saratoga Performing Arts Center is located today was once known to the Mohawk as Dandaraga ("vale of springs"), and its best spring was Awasa ("where the bear drinks"), a word of Algonkian origin. The mineral springs in what is now Saratoga, by whatever name they are called, are still a beloved place, regarded for the beauty of the landscape as well as for the healing properties of the waters.

[Thanks to Marge Bruchac for contributing this article]

[Caption: Island Spouter, Geyser Park, Saratoga Springs, NY]

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