

Aboriginal Place Names in Manitoba

These are the names that were given to places in Manitoba in the time of our *ancestors* – a long time ago.

***Assessippi:** This was a small village located north of Russell. Today, it is a provincial park. *Assessippi* is the Dené name for the nearby river, and it means “shell river, water.”

Assiniboine River: This river flows from Saskatchewan into Manitoba. It joins the Red River at The Forks in Winnipeg. It was named after the Assiniboine people, of the Dakota nation, and was first called *The Stone Indian River* because people would heat stones from the river and place them in pots to boil water. We are not sure whether the name *Assiniboine* comes from the Cree or the Ojibway language. It means “boiling stones.”

Athapapuskow Lake: This lake is south of Flin Flon. It is a Cree name meaning “rocks on both sides” (of the lake).

***Atikaki Provincial Park:** This park is east of Lake Winnipeg and north of Nopiming Provincial Park. The name is Cree and means “the land of the caribou.”

Birtle: The name of the town west of Shoal Lake is a contraction of the name *Birdtail River*, which flows near it. The river or creek branches resemble a spreading bird’s tail, which could explain the name. Legend says that a band of Dakota, who had been following a bison herd, camped by a river. The chief’s son noticed a lovely bird flying by, but a hawk swooped. The bird escaped but dropped a blue tail feather near the boy. As the boy leaned over to grasp the feather, he slipped and drowned. When the boy’s body was found, he was still clutching the blue feather. From that time the Dakota spoke of the river as the “Birdtail.”

Hamiota: This is a village south of Shoal Lake. It was first called Hamilton, but the name changed to Hamiota in 1884. Some say that Hamiota is a contraction of *Hamilton* and *ota*, which is Cree for “at this place.” Others say that *iota* is Dakota for “many” so it would mean “a place where many Hamiltons lived.”

* indicates that the name is given to a national or provincial park. Many of our parks have Aboriginal names.

Kettle Island: Kettle Island is located in the lower Saskatchewan River, west of Cedar Lake. The island was once a favourite camping and fishing place of the Swampy Cree. There is a clump of poplar where councils, dances, and feasts were held. In the Swampy Cree language, the place was called *Kash-ke-bu-jes-pu-qua-ne-shing*, meaning "tying the mouth of a drum." Early Europeans thought that the drums of the Swampy Cree were similar to European kettle drums, hence the name *Kettle Island*.

Koostatak: This is a community northeast of Hodgson in the Fisher River Reserve 44. The post office was named for Harry Koostatak, a counsellor for the Fisher River Band. Koostaak is Cree for "let us fear."

Lobstick Creek: This creek flows north to Swan River. A lobstick is a tree (usually a tall evergreen), which is trimmed so only the upper branches are left. It is usually used as a landmark to direct people, but sometimes it is made to celebrate a special event in the community. Settlers learned to make lobsticks from the local First Nations people. There is also a Lobstick Bay and Lobstick Narrows. It is a Canadian word that comes from an Aboriginal custom.

Makinak: This is a community northwest of McCreary. *Makinak* is an Aboriginal word meaning turtle, and refers to the nearby Turtle River.

Manitoba: There are many different stories about this name. When Louis Riel chose the name, people said that it meant "the God that speaks." There is also a story about a lake where the waves made a roaring sound when they hit the limestone. The Cree and Ojibway people said that a Manito or Spirit was beating a drum.

Manigotogan River: This river flows into Lake Winnipeg. The Cree called it "bad throat" river because the water makes a noise like a man clearing his throat.

Manitou: This is a village northwest of Morden. It was first known as Manitoba City but was then changed to Manitou, meaning "supernatural spirit (or God)." It is probably from the Cree word.

Minitonas: This is a town southeast of Swan River. It is thought to be from a Dakota word meaning either "home of little god," or "isolated."

Minnedosa: This town is west of Neepawa and north of Brandon. It was said to mean "rapid water," from the Dakota word, *Minnedouza*. The Little Saskatchewan River runs through this area. The first postmaster, Joseph S. Armitage, liked the name of Minnedouza because his wife's name was Minnie. The spelling changed, and he and his wife named their first daughter Minnedosa. The first baby boy born in the settlement was called Mindo.

Miniota: This is a rural municipality and small community north of Virden. A surveyor in the area had what he described as “the best drink of water in his life.” He suggested to the postmaster that they call the place Miniota – a combination of two Dakota words, meaning “plenty of water.”

Napinka: This is a community northwest of Deloraine, near the Souris River. Early settlers thought that it would grow to a much greater size, so they named it Napinka, which is a Dakota word meaning “double or equal to two.”

Neepawa: This community is now known as the “Lily Capital.” Early settlers grew successful crops, and they chose to name their community *Neepawa*, which means “plenty” or “abundance” in Ojibway. The town uses a cornucopia (horn of plenty) as one of its symbols.

Ninga: This small community is northwest of Killarney. The postal inspector in Winnipeg assigned the name to this community. It is an Ojibway word meaning “mother.”

***Nopiming Provincial Park:** This park is southeast of Bissett and was established in 1976. The name is Ojibway and means “entrance to,” or “out in the wilderness.”

Pasquia (also Opasquia): This community is southwest of The Pas. This Aboriginal settlement was formerly identified as the Carrot River Settlement. In 1965, the official name changed back to the Cree word *Pasquia*, which means the river “narrows between wooded banks.” Writers suggest *The Pas* comes from the word “Pasquia.”

Paungassi: This community runs along the western shore of Fishing Lake. The word probably comes from Cree and means “sandy bar.”

Peguis: This area is north of Selkirk. It is a reserve named after Chief Peguis (also called William Prince), of the Dakota at Red River. His great-grandson said that Peguis received his name because he was abandoned as a baby, and was found on a pile of wood chips. The woman who found him named him *Peeh-quaa-is*, or *Little Chip*. She raised him as her own son. A bridge and a school in Winnipeg are also named after him.

Pembina River and Pembina Hills: The community is west of Morden. Pembina is Cree for “summerberry,” or “cranberry bush.” The people who lived in the area often mixed the berries into pemmican. People often went to the Pembina area when Winnipeg was flooded because it is at a higher elevation and not affected by flood water.

Pukatawagan: This community is north of Sherridon, on the Lynn Lake branch of the CNR. There is a settlement by this name, as well as a lake and a river. *Pukatawagan* is Cree for “fishing place,” or “fishing with a net.” It was known as a good place to catch whitefish.

Shamattawa: This community is at the junction of the Gods and Echoing rivers. Shamatawa is also the name of a river. The name is Cree for “big fork,” or “meeting of the rivers.” There used to be a Hudson’s Bay Company fort there.

Sipiwesk Lake: This lake is north of Cross Lake. Different people have said that this is a Cree name meaning either “light through the trees lake” or “lake of channels.” Descriptions of the lake tell us that you can usually see the light through the trees, and there are a lot of channels in the lake.

Tadoule Lake (pronounced Tadoulay): This is the name of both a lake and a community. It was a new Dené community in the 1800s. People from several communities then moved to Tadoule Lake. The name is Dené and means “floating ashes,” or “charcoal lake.” It is possible that the community was named when people came to the area after a forest fire, when the earth was charred by fire.

Wanipigow: This community is north of Manigotogan on the eastern shore of Lake Winnipeg at the Hollow Water Indian Reserve 10. The word comes from the Ojibway *Wanepegaw*, which mean “hollow water.” One explanation for the name is that before there was a dam on the river, this is where people collected maple syrup. The maple trees hung so far over the opening of the river that entering the river felt like entering a hole. Another explanation could be that the river flows into the lake through a hole in a rock.

***Wapusk National Park:** This park was established in 1996. It is in the Hudson Bay and James Bay Lowlands, southeast of Churchill. The name is Cree for “white bear.” This area is the world’s largest denning area for polar bears. You can also find birds, caribou, moose, and wolves.

Wasagaming: This community is on Clear Lake, north of Erickson, in Riding Mountain National Park. It was once called Clark Beach, but was renamed as a result of a naming contest. Edna Medd won the contest for her suggested name of *Wasagaming*, which is a Dakota word meaning “clear water,” or “water that is so clear that the sun shines on the bottom.” Grey Owl once lived in the park. His cabin is still there.

Waskada: This village is southwest of Deloraine. There are two possible explanations for its name. One story says that it is a Dakota word meaning "the best of everything." The other story says that whenever homesteaders asked the Dakota people about the land, the people would say *Wa-sta-daow*, meaning "better further on," because they wanted the homesteaders to go somewhere else.

Wawanesa: This village is southeast of Brandon. It was once called *Sipewiski*, meaning "crooked river." The early settlers thought it sounded too much like "sip of whiskey," so they changed it. The new name is a Cree word that can be translated as "beautiful vista," "wild geese," or "wild goose nest."

***Wekusko:** This community is south of Wekusko Lake. Wekusko Lake is part of the Grass River/Wekusko Falls Provincial Park. The name is Cree and means "sweetgrass," or "herb lake."

Winnipeg: This is the name of Manitoba's capital city and the province's largest lake, Lake Winnipeg. There are many stories about the origin of the name, but the most well-known says that the word comes from Cree words meaning "dirty water," "bad water," or "water with dirty green weeds."

Sources:

Buchner, Anthony P. *Geographical Names of Manitoba*.
Winnipeg: Manitoba Conservation, 2000.

Ham, Penny. *Place Names of Manitoba*. Saskatoon:
Western Producer Prairie Books, 1980.

Aboriginal Place Name Cards

Atikaki Provincial Park

1. Look up the meaning of the place name on this card.
2. Write down the meaning, and explain which language it came from.
3. Find the place on a map or atlas.
4. Report your information to the class.
5. On a big map of Manitoba, show the class where the place is.

Asessippi Provincial Park

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Assiniboine River

1. Look up the meaning of the place name on this card.
2. Write down the meaning, and explain which language it came from.
3. Find the place on a map or atlas.
4. Mark the place on your outline map of Manitoba.
5. Report your information to the class.

Athapapuskow River

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Birtle

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Hamiota

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Kettle Island

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Koostatak

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Lobstick Creek

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Makinak

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Manitoba

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Manigotogan River

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Manitou

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Minifonas

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Minnedosa

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Miniota

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Napinka

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Neepawa

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Ninga

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Nopiming Provincial Park

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Pasquia

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Paungassi

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Peguis

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Pembina River

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Pukatawagan

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Shamattawa

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Sipiwesk Lake

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Tadoule Lake

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Wanipigow

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Wapusk National Park

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Wasagaming

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Waskada

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Wawanesa

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Wekusko

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Winnipeg

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