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What in the World is "Watauga?"

By Allan Scherlen

When Jeane Supin called the reference desk of the ASU Library to ask me the meaning of one of the words in her company's name, "Watauga Consulting," I didn't foresee the long and mysterious quest that had just been assigned to me. The meaning of that familiar word, "Watauga," should be a simple question for a librarian in Boone, North Carolina. Every time I turn around I see something called Watauga. Our county, one of our rivers and a lake not too far away bear this name. A perusal of the phone book reveals about four columns of businesses, organizations, and government offices with the word "Watauga" in their titles.

Since "Watauga" is everywhere you turn, it is surprising that the various reference books you can check or locals you may wish to ask have different answers as to what is a "Watauga." Most folks are not really sure where they saw or heard the definition, but they are certain about what it means: beautiful waters, running waters, falling water, whispering waters, clear waters ...but wait. It can't mean all these things.

Now, being a librarian, my first natural inclination is to look to reference books for the answer. This should be a fairly simple matter. But as I discovered, I was in for a ride. The *North Carolina Gazetteer* caught me off guard with its vague pre-politically correct definition of Watauga: "an Indian word meaning 'beautiful water.'" Indian word? Is that a little like saying the word "river" is a European word? Considered unacceptable and not very quotable these days. The *Illustrated Dictionary of Place Names* was not much more helpful. Its authors declared "Watauga" to be "from a Cherokee word whose meaning has been lost. It has been variously interpreted as 'river of plenty,' 'beautiful water,' 'river of islands,' 'I heard,' and 'foaming at the mouth,' among others" This definition at least attempted to name the language of origin, but left my head reeling with its endless meanings. This reference, not unlike others I was to examine on this subject, saw no need to provide references as to who provided these interpretations. And what was this "foaming at the mouth" interpretation about?

Of course, I didn't forget to search the web. One of the main sites that appeared from a simple Excite search was the online version of *The Handbook of Texas*, published by the The Texas State Historical Association. Apparently, Texas has a town named Watauga. *The Handbook* defines the name as "a Cherokee word meaning village of many springs." This Texas connection would require some further investigation.

My interest in a seemingly simple reference question was quickly turning into a full blown quest. I couldn't stop until I found a convincing answer to the meaning of "Watauga" or I could rest easy that nothing certain could be found. . The mystery was getting too intriguing. I called Jean back and told her that I would be on this question a while --days, maybe weeks-- but I wasn't going to stop until I had the answer to what is "Watauga." She knows me pretty well and was not surprised.

“Call Maggie,” Jeane suggested before hanging up. “She might have the answer. She named her clinic after the meaning of the word.” Why hadn’t Jeane mentioned this before? I called Maggie at the “Whispering Waters Animal Clinic” and asked her if it was true, that she named her clinic after the true meaning of the word.

“Yes, Watauga means ‘whispering waters.’”

“How do you know? Where did you see this?”

“I’m not sure exactly. It was in some of the literature sent out by the Chamber of Commerce when I moved here. It was something very official. I’ve been wanting to find it so I can have a nice sign made of the quote”

“What would you think, Maggie, if Watauga meant something else? I’ve been finding a lot of different meanings.”

“That would be ok.”

Of course-- the Chamber of Commerce. I called them immediately. They have steered a lot of people in the right direction. Maybe they had the definitive answer all along.

“Yes, I’m calling to ask if you know the meaning of the word, ‘Watauga,’” I asked the voice on the phone at the Chamber. “Whispering waters,” she answered matter-of-factly, without hesitation. “It’s an Indian word meaning ‘whispering waters’”.

I could tell she was about to hang up when I quickly interjected, “Do you know what book that comes from in case I need to quote it?”

“I think you can find it in the Curiosity Shop in a book called *The History of Watauga County*”

I thanked her and headed back into the ASU book stacks which are a little closer than the Curiosity Shop’s. It wasn’t hard to find the classic *History of Watauga County, North Carolina*, by John Preston Arthur, published in 1915. The library has a bunch of them. It’s kind of the bible of our local history. To summarize the author’s opening chapter, he sets the tone of the book by proposing that the indigenous peoples of North America are decedents from Israel, via the Bering Strait. He then quotes James Mooney’s Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, 1897, stating that the meaning of words such as Watauga is lost. This is followed by the advice that we give some serious consideration to Martin V. Moore who in his turn of the century publication, *The Rhyme of Southern Waters*, suggests that the mellifluous names of North Carolina rivers and mountains are European in origin.

This was all quite arcane and fascinating in its own right. But I had to move ahead and check out the classic Mooney book to which he referred. I had earlier in the day received an e-mail response from a reference librarian friend at Western Carolina University. She had asked the Cherokee scholar, George Frizzell, what he thought the meaning of “Watauga” was, only to receive the suggestion we look at Mooney. Dean Williams, of the Appalachian Collection also had kindly led me to the key section of James Mooney’s *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* earlier that day. All roads seem to be leading to the great James Mooney. Here are his authoritative words: “Watâ’gĩ (commonly written Watauga, also Watoga, Wattoogee, Whatoga, etc.) The meaning of the name is lost.” That was it. Mooney had been brief and to the

point. But could this declaration be the final answer? Could the meaning of “Watauga” be lost? I couldn’t stop, no matter how sure my sources were, not even for Mooney. I enlisted everyone I knew on the project. One librarian I called thought she had certainly seen it written somewhere that Watauga meant “running water” or “falling water.” But she couldn’t remember where. Another had a vague recollection of “flowing water” as the translation.

I remembered the lady at the Chamber of Commerce. Where could she have gotten the information she was so sure of? I found the *Watauga County Handbook*, a thin but impressive volume prepared and distributed as a public service by the League of Women Voters of Watauga County. Right there on the first page, plain as day was certainly where my friend Maggie and the Chamber got their definition: “The county was named Watauga after an Indian word meaning “Whispering Waters.”

Geri Purpur, my friend at the Watauga Public Library, found another book that might produce a promising lead. But the book, *A New Geography of North Carolina* by Bill Sharpe published in the mid 50’s, only compounded my confusion and expanded my list of possible definitions: “The truth is,” states Sharpe in his book, “ nobody knows what ‘Watauga’ means. Apparently it is a Cherokee word, and here are some of the interpretations, each given by reputable writers [*who?*]: ‘Beautiful Waters,’ ‘River of Islands,’ ‘Name of Indian Tribe,’ and ‘The Land Beyond.’” As with my other sources, I was left standing without footnotes, without a hint of who these “reputable writers” might be. How are we to trust these guys? I can’t settle the mystery on Sharp’s unfootnoted words.

I called both local newspapers. They are always looking into local stories of historical interest. A reporter at one of the papers said he had heard it meant “sparkling clean water.” An editor of the other paper, the one with “*Watauga*” prominently displayed in the title, gave me the answer I had found in the *North Carolina Gazetteer* and since found in the State’s online version of the *North Carolina Encyclopedia*: “beautiful water.”

“You have to do better than that,” I told her jokingly. “I mean you people are the *Watauga Democrat* after all. You *have* to have the scoop on the name.” We laughed for some time about the elusive word until she gave me some more leads to call, prominent local authorities and enthusiasts on Appalachian history. I thanked her and agreed to call back when I found the answer. This quest for Watauga was gaining momentum and some hope of resolution.

I called the experts around town, historians, those associated with the cultural museum and the Horn of the West, but they were as befuddled as I. The latter contact, Curtus Smalling, gave me the name of his Cherokee friend in Cherokee North Carolina, Bo Taylor, who speaks the language and knows other, older Cherokee people who might be able to shed some light on the word. I called the Cherokee contact and left a message. I also wrote an e-mail to Marvin J. Summerfield, the language editor of the *Cherokee Observer* newspaper in Oklahoma, which is printed in Cherokee. I hoped someone who spoke Cherokee could tell me straight if Watauga was Cherokee in origin, if it at least sounded like a Cherokee word and, if so, what it might mean.

Back at the library I continued to comb the Cherokee books in the Appalachian Collection. There I found a book by Vicki Rozema called *Footsteps of the Cherokees: A Guide to the Eastern Homelands of the Cherokee Nation*, published in 1995. She noted that the original Cherokee village where Elizabethton is now located was called Wata’gi. She writes confidently that, like Mooney, she believes Watauga comes from the word Wata’gi, but she diverges from Mooney in proposing that Watauga comes “from the Creek word *wetoga*, meaning broken waters, which described the shoals on the Watauga River.” Creek? This was the first reference I had found to a

tribe other than Cherokee. Where did she get this information? Again, there was no reference in her book. I researched her name on the web, came up with a phone number, and left a message, describing my interest in her differing opinion on the origin of the word. Later that night I called her again and she sounded as though she had been giving my question some thought. I read the passage from her book to refresh her memory, but she could not recall where she had gotten her information about Wata'gi or the Creek Indian origin. She offered to go through her seven year-old boxes of research and get back to me by e-mail if she found anything. If her boxes of past research were anything like mine I would not be hearing from her anytime soon.

Time to get back to my primary sources, I thought. The best hope I had of finding the true meaning of Watauga, I thought, was from the remaining living speakers of the Cherokee language themselves, people who could judge first hand if the word "Watauga" or even "watagi" or "watoga" comes close to anything they know in their language. I sent a second e-mail to the language editor of the Cherokee Observer, encouraging him to consider my request to judge the word. I told him I wanted to publish my results in the next week's paper and wanted to include his input. I called Bo Taylor, at the Cherokee Museum, again and this time he was in the office. Bo speaks Cherokee himself but he did not recognize the word, "Watauga" in his language. He did kindly agree to consult older speakers of the language to see what they thought and to send me their answers by e-mail. It was beginning to look as though I might finally get to the truth or resolve the mystery one way or another.

As of publication, I have not heard back from Marvin J. Summerfield at the *Cherokee Observer*, Bo Taylor, at the Cherokee Museum, or Vicki Rozema. But I am not giving up. There are still people in Watauga, Texas to interview and, who knows, maybe I can talk *The Mountain Times* into sponsoring a contest to reward the person who can produce definitive proof as to the origin and meaning of the word "Watauga."

Perhaps "Watauga" is an ancient place name whose meaning is long lost. Maybe "Watauga" is not an indigenous word at all. I am almost willing to accept that we may never know the truth. I guess at least until we can pin down what a "Watauga" is, you are free to interpret "Watauga" as you please. So, here are your choices thus far – take your pick:

- beautiful waters
- beautiful water
- running waters
- falling water
- whispering waters
- clear waters
- flowing water
- village of many springs
- river of plenty
- I heard
- foaming at the mouth
- broken waters
- river of islands
- the land beyond
- name of an Indian village
- name of Indian tribe

Oh, there is one more thing; if you know of another interpretation I haven't mentioned please send it my way so I can add yours to the list. The meaning of 'Watauga' has got to be out there somewhere.