

Buffalo's Name

By John Fagant

One question that seems to surface during any tour of the city is “How did Buffalo get its name?” For that matter, the question has been a source of controversy for many years, starting soon after Buffalo became a village. One of the earliest theories was provided by Sheldon Ball in his 1825 “History of Buffalo” when he suggested that several Frenchmen at the creek hunted some horses and passed it off as buffalo meat to the rest of the party. William Ketchum discussed the topic in his “The Origin of the Name of Buffalo” in 1863. Samuel Manning Welch reviewed a couple of possibilities in his memoirs written in the late 1800’s. Even Millard Fillmore expressed his opinion on the subject, suggesting that the writer of the 1784 Treaty of Fort Stanwix may have misspelled the word “beaver”. The popular theory of the last few decades has Buffalo’s name coming from a mispronunciation of the French phrase “Beau Fleuve” or “Beautiful River” which, according to this supposition, was Father Hennepin’s exclamation upon viewing the river for the first time.

So where did the name “Buffalo” come from? The easy answer to that question is that the village was named after the creek near it – Buffalo Creek. But where then did the creek receive its name? Therein lies the mystery.

Could it possibly have been named after the animal? Were there buffalo roaming around Western New York? Over the years, written accounts have surfaced claiming just that. In 1640, the Jesuit priests Jean de Brebeuf & Joseph Chaumonot visited the Attirondaron villages on the Niagara Frontier and wrote that among other animals, the tribe hunted the

buffalo. The Frenchman La Hontan in 1688 and the Jesuit Charlevoix in 1721 both reported the presence of buffalo on the south shore of Lake Erie, in the vicinity of what is now Ohio. James Smith wrote that he hunted buffalo from 1755 to 1759 after he was captured and lived with the Caughnawaga Indian tribe in Ohio and western Pennsylvania. In 1820, William Ketchum interviewed the elder Senecas still living in the Buffalo area. They said Seneca tradition had the buffalo visiting the salt lick near Mineral Springs on an annual basis but not in their lifetime. So tradition and eyewitness accounts seem to indicate that WNY at some point in the past did have the occasional presence of a herd. However, that does not necessarily mean the village was named for the animal.

The French were the first Europeans to venture into Western New York. In 1754, Captain DeLery, on his way to the Ohio Valley, referred to the creek as the "**Riviere aux Chevaux**" or the "river where the horses are" which was located at "**Le Petit Rapide**" or "the Little Rapid." No mention is made of any buffalo but one does get curious as to the prominence of horses in the area. The horses, it turns out, were transported by Daniel Joncaire to the creek land, where they were used to pull the barques up the Niagara and into Lake Erie. The Little Rapid was the portion of the Niagara River that flows through the Black Rock area over the Onondaga escarpment where the rough waters made boat travel difficult. The French did name one stream the Buffalo River, as in "**Riviere aux Boeufs**". However, this reference was to a creek that emptied into Lake Ontario, most likely the Oak Orchard Creek.

By the 1780's, the Senecas were beginning to populate the land by the creek. Their words such as "**Tehosororon**" or "**Dyosowa**" seemingly refer to the stream as "the place of the basswoods." Apparently, the basswood was a very common tree located on its banks.

In the early 1760's, Lt. John Montrossor, an engineer in the British army, was ordered to design a fort at the Lake Erie end of the Niagara River. The first reference to the creek as "Buffalo Creek" appears not only on a map of this time period, but also in Montrossor's journal of 1764. He mentioned Buffalo Creek in four separate entries, indicating a familiarity with the name rather than something new or unique. The "Buffalo Creek" name is also found in the captivity narrative of the Gilbert family (1784) and in the Treaty of Fort Stanwix (1784).

So where does the name come from? It shows up in the historical record somewhere between 1759 and 1764, as the French left WNY and the British entered into our local history. Could it have been named for the animal? Possibly, as the James Smith captivity narrative suggests the presence of them as late as 1759. However, the Seneca elders of 1820 do not recall any buffalo in WNY in their lifetime which would include this period making this theory an unlikely one.

So what theories are possible? In 1795, Captain Daniel Dobbins traveled to Buffalo Creek and stayed in the tavern owned by Cornelius Winney, an Indian trader. Dobbins asked Winney about the origin of the Buffalo name. Winney responded that the name did not come from the animal but instead from an old Indian who lived on the creek. His name in English meant "buffalo" as he apparently "was a large square-framed man, with stoop shoulders, and large bushy head" that gave him a resemblance to the animal. This theory has some plausibility based on the fact that Smokes Creek and Con-ja-qua-da's Creek (now Scajaquada) were named after the Indians living near them.

Another possibility is that the British, who typically kept the names of the streams and places by translating the French into English, may have misinterpreted “chevaux” to mean buffalo instead of horses.

What about the “Beau Fleuve” idea, the Father Hennepin exclamation of joy and surprise? This one is easily the most popular one circulating the region today. Is there any merit to it? There seems to be no evidence for this interpretation as the French writings of the period have yet to bring forth this phrase. A 1911 edition of “The Live Wire”, a Buffalo Chamber of Commerce production, suggested that this theory came from a Dr. Paul F. Bussman. Bussman, a physician who lived on Jefferson Ave. at the turn of the century, wrote that “Buffalo was named in 1678 on the 6th day of December by ... Louis Hennepin” and that the name derived from “the faulty pronunciation by the Indian of the French *beaufleuve*.” Unfortunately, Dr. Bussman leaves no references as to where this information was obtained.

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