

## **Viewpoint: Changing Place Names**

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From the July 2023 issue of *Adirondack Explorer*

Let us begin with a stout truism: To change a place name is to change history, and there are few things more offensive than that. You see, in New York State alone there have already been many instances of people uneducated in the field of onomastics (the study of origins and forms of words) demanding supposed "offensive" place names be changed. Problem is, seldom do these people take the time to learn the stories behind the names and learn what words mean. They are fueled by emotion instead of intellect, and as a therapist I assure you that is not a good way to go through life. Five quick examples demonstrate the irrational demands of the supposed "offended."

The most popular target is the word "squaw," which means "an American Indian woman" and is entirely inoffensive to anyone familiar with its pedigree. Another is "cripple," which in the world of place names refers to the difficulty of traversing certain terrain and has nothing to do with people with disabilities. Another is "Wappinger." This case involved a state employee demanding annihilation of this name because the first syllable is pronounced "wop" and sounds like the old-time derogatory term for Italians. It's the name of an Indian tribe. Another is "Fishkill." This case involved People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) insisting removal of all "kills" because the word "suggests cruelty." It's Dutch for "stream." My, for lack of a better word, favorite case took place outside The Empire State and involved three schools named "Lynch" within Portland's Centennial School District. This name, which has never had anything to do with lynching, honored the benevolent Lynch family that donated land for construction of public places a century earlier. Talk about no good deed going unpunished.

As a historian I find this fad deeply troubling, and in my books I've warned of people unfamiliar with onomastics running amok, beheading innocent place names with their broadswords that were cast in ignorance, sharpened with wokeness. If they demand place names that only honor people who never sinned, and if they demand place names that pacify everyone and all future generations to come, the only solution will be erasure of every place name in existence. Yet there's an immeasurably better alternative. That is, the easily offended educate themselves and not attempt to change history.