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Tar River (The Name)

By BRUCE COTTEN

It seems to be well established, both by tradition and by official documents that this river was once sometimes called Taw River. Most of our North Carolina histories have so stated and there are numerous wills, deeds and other papers preserved which refer to it as Taw or Tor River.

Lawson in his thousand miles journey in 1701 appears to have crossed Tar River a few miles below the present town of Greenville. However, he calls it the Pampticough and neither in his text nor on his map does the name Tar, or Taw, appear.

Williamson calls it Taw River wherever referred to in his work, and says that in the Indian language the word Taw signifies the river of health.

Dr. Hawks repudiates this assertion of Williamson and says:

"Its name is not Tar, though Col. Byrd called it by that name more than one hundred years ago. Others have supposed its original Indian name to be Taw or Tor, which Williamson with his customary dogmatism, ignorantly states means 'Health.' It never had such a meaning in any dialect of the Algonquin or Iroquois that we have met with (and these were the two mother languages of the Indians of the eastern side of North Carolina) nor was there any such Indian Word as far as we can discover; though such a syllable formed from an Indian word, is found in the composition of Indian words, according to the known polythinseticism of our Indian tongues. But the river was notwithstanding, called Taw, for we find (as I am informed by a friend*) that name applied in a patent of 1729.

* H. T. Clark, Esq., of Edgecombe.

"Wheeler, Simms, Emmons and Cook, all modern authorities, repudiating 'Tar' call it 'Tau.'

"Mr. Clark thinks that from analogy, it should be written 'Taw' and cites the names *Haw*, *Catawba*, *Chickasaw*, *Choc-taw*, where the syllable terminates with *w*.

"But the fact is that in the orthography of Indian names and words it is important to know to what country the individual belonged who first wrote them down for the eye of civilized man; otherwise the pronunciation may be mistaken.

"For ourselves while we are quite sure the river's true name never was Tar, we doubt whether Taw is the original word.

"Words of one syllable are exceedingly rare in the Indian languages, and especially in the name of places. They are almost invariably compounds.

"Its Indian name was Torpaeo and we think it should be so called now. Taw is but a corruption of the first syllable Tor. We have tried in vain to discover the meaning of the compound Tor-paeo."

Dr. Hawk's assertion that its Indian name was Torpaeo rests solely upon a map and an account of a journey accredited to John Lederer, a German, who claimed to have traveled far into the country south of Virginia in 1670.

Lederer, it seems, with certain Englishmen, was commissioned by Governor Berkely of Virginia to make the journey, for the purpose of exploration and for the purpose of discovering a pass over the mountains. His English companions deserted him on the upper James and Lederer claims that he made the journey accompanied only by an Indian guide named Jackzetavon.

Upon his return to Virginia he was received with insults and with such reproaches that he believed his life in danger; the Virginians very frankly disbelieving his statements as to his travels and discoveries.

Whereupon Lederer betook himself to Maryland where he succeeded in interesting the governor, Sir William Talbot,

who having been convinced that he was "a modest and ingenious person and a pretty scholar" himself translated, from the Latin into English, his account of his journeyings and printed the whole, with a map in London in 1672.

This account of Lederer, as translated and published by Talbot, sets forth geographic conditions which we know could not have existed in North Carolina and the impression gained is that the Virginians were entirely right in their estimate of the man's worth.

From the text it is impossible to recognize, positively, any part of North Carolina and the conviction is strong that Lederer never made the journey claimed, but has set forth, both in his text and on his map his impressions and idea of what that country was, as understood perhaps from Indians and frontier reports.

South of the Roanoke two rivers are shown, the Torpaeo and the Errico. Both are erroneously made to flow into Roanoke river.

The Torpaeo is undoubtedly intended for what is now Tar river and the Errico either the Neuse or Contentnea Creek. This arrangement of these streams is likewise shown on a map prepared for the Lords Proprietors in 1671, which for the interior of the country is the same as the Lederer map; one being a copy of the other so far as they relate to the interior of the country called Carolina.

This name Torpaeo does not appear in any other description or map preserved of the country, but several Indian names compounded with the sound of "tor" subsequently appear on the map and in the records as well and are generally located on Tar River, or in the vicinity of Contentnea Creek.

Tauhunter was an Indian town either on the Tar, or on Contentnea Creek, more likely on the latter and the name seems to have been preserved in Nahunter Creek in Greene County.

Toisnot is the beautiful name of a creek and swamp in Wilson County and was the name of a pretty village in the

same county, until changed into the homely compound of Elm City.

Other Indian names in that section had sounds that might have led into a corruption of Taw, or Tor. Lawson in describing his crossing of what seems to have been Contentnea Creek says it was called by the Indian Chattoukau. This name also appears to have been the Indian name for the point of land whereon New Bern stands, and is said to have been taken to New York by the Tuscarora Indians and as Chautauqua became the name of a lake, town and county in that state from which is called our modern Chautauqua.

Just how the Indians applied these names, whether to a stream, a location, to a general section or tribe cannot be said, but at least there were some words or names in the Indian dialect of the section between Tar River and the Neuse which could have been suggested to the early settlers to call this river Taw after their own Taw River in England from the vicinity of which many of them came. Indeed this seems a probable explanation of the early efforts to call it Taw.

Taw River in England is a beautiful little stream, having its source among the "Tors" of Dartmoor in Devonshire and flowing north into Bidiford Bay. These Tors, or huge blocks of granite that crown most of the hills, are a striking characteristic of the landscape in the county where Sir Walter Raleigh was born and the name Tor and Taw has been very plentifully applied to the topography of the surrounding country.

There are many prominent Tors such as Yes Tor, Back Tor, High Tor, Cor Tor and Hare Tor while besides Taw River we have Tawton, Torquey, Tor Bay and many other names that trace their origin directly to the Tors. The word is also spelled Tor and Taw just as to the river was in North Carolina.

The word is of Saxon origin though some say it was applied by the Romans to these hill tops in Devon because they

sometimes present a shape resembling the Greek letter tau (?). However the word is applied in Devonshire to any elevation that has rocks on its summit, just as "scar" is used in Yorkshire. It is also said that the first marbles were made from the stone of these Tors, hence the game Taw, and the position of Taw is still a prominent position in the playing of that most scientific of all juvenile games now called marbles.

Very many of the early settlers who came to Virginia and North Carolina came from the vicinity of Taw River and the Tors of Devonshire. Indeed after the battle of Sedgemoore in 1685, Devonshire was almost depopulated so great was the exodus, enforced or otherwise, to different parts of the new world. Very many of these people found their way to Virginia and into North Carolina.

Coming first upon Tar River in what is now Edgecombe or Nash County, there is reason to believe that these early settlers did not know that it was the same stream that lower down was called Pamlico. The impression being that it was tributary to the Roanoke as set forth in the maps of Lederer and Ogilby. Indeed some Scotch families having early settled south of the Roanoke in what is now lower Halifax County, the section was called "The Scotland Neck" under the impression it would seem that it was on a neck formed by the confluence of these two streams, or by Fishing Creek and the Roanoke.

So these people christened this river, or attempted to christen it, Taw River after their own Taw River in far off Devonshire just as Englishmen have always wanted to carry their place names with them. We know of course, that the attempt failed and the river was called Tar almost as soon as it was called Taw. If there was something in the Indian dialect of the section that suggested Taw, Taw itself at once suggested Tar, in honor of the then principal commodity of the country through which it flows. So Tar River it has been called exclusively for many years now and will no doubt continue by that name always.

Those settlers who pushed their way down the river called it Tar while those who pushed their way up the river, from old Bath County called it Pamlico, and it was known as Pamlico far up into what is now Pitt County. Finally as the up stream settlement dominated, the town of Washington became the dividing line, below which it is called Pamlico, above which it is called Tar River.

