

“What does Shenandoah Mean?”

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What Shenandoah means is probably the wrong question to ask. Or, rather, it can't be effectively answered by current cultural expectations about places and names. In the United States and much of the world today, names and places are static and inseparable. Political influences may entail name changes from time to time, but the indelible relationship between place and name endures. The United States Board of Geographic Names holds responsibility for keeping and managing the definitive Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) of the U.S.

Geographical Survey. Names therein are known and carry precise meanings: Harpers Ferry is a place where Robert Harper operated a ferry across the Potomac River from 1761 to 1782.

Notable individuals whose lives have meaning in history are remembered in these place names. The meaning of many places such as Boston or Richmond derive meaning from namesake towns in a founder's homeland. Many fixed names, of course, can be traced to indigenous usage. And so forth.

I cannot say that I've found the same fixed relationship between nomenclature and culture in all the research I've conducted in indigenous peoples and the places they inhabited in North America including the Shenandoah Valley. Insofar as “Shenandoah” has indigenous origins, it is not a immobile place on the American landscape. First peoples employed it numerous times in numerous places. The GNIS records the remnants of thirty of these places on the map of the United States today. Furthermore, indigenous people adopted “Shenandoah” or its cognates for personal names or perhaps for objects in a lost material world or forces in the perdurable spiritual world.

What can we make of this shifting, ambiguous landscape? Most likely indigenous peoples were more concerned with the qualities of various environments or human character than determining an indelible location and meaning in the address of some place or someone. And indeed, nineteenth-century ethnographers record many references to “Shenandoah” in the region of Haudenosaunee settlement and influence as “Great Hemlock,” “in the plains,” “the spruce stream,” “the stream passing through spruce pines,” “there it has a large mountain,” “stream flowing by a great mountain,” or simply, “a great plain.” At the same time contemporary linguists specializing in Iroquoian speech, whom I have consulted, affirm that “Shenandoah” has no intrinsic meaning such as “Daughter of the Stars,” so often attributed to it. It could equally refer to an episode among the spirit forces of an animistic nature or the very residence of those forces.

So, how do we respond when asked “What does Shenandoah Mean?” or “Why is Shenandoah University so named?” Best we say, “In all honesty, we don't really know.” Maybe we can't know. The answer is ineffable or unknowable in the way we know places today. What we do know about the place we call “Shenandoah” derives from documents and maps drafted by people across the span of 350 years who sought to fix names on places as an expression of the European and then American occupation and appropriation of indigenous lands. Can we better say that it refers to the spirit of the place in a spirit world beyond human understanding.