

## Geologic Site of the Month

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# ***Geologically Speaking, What's in a Place Name?***



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## Introduction

Most students enrolled in an introductory geology class hear the term *monadnock*, defined in the American Geological Institute *Glossary of Geology* as an upstanding rock, hill, or mountain rising conspicuously above the general level of the surrounding landscape. The type locality for this land feature is [Mt. Monadnock](#) in New Hampshire. The [Monadnock State Park website](#) identifies the word monadnock as an Abenaki term meaning 'mountain that stands alone.' However, several other sources interpret it to mean 'at the mountain which sticks up like an island', or 'at the most prominent mountain.' Alternatively, the *Western Abenaki Dictionary* by Gordon M. Day, defines it as a 'smooth mountain' and provides the locative spelling 'menonadenak.'



### Algonquian Words

Here we encounter one of the pitfalls of interpreting the place names of features in New England, in particular those names given to areas or places by the people who were living here before the European arrival. There are many Algonquian language-based words for mountains, rivers, and communities in Maine. The names were given to specific locations for their geographical characteristics and their importance to the Indian people. However, many of the names used by the Colonists do not apply in the same way as the original speakers intended them. To quote Day:

*"Let us admit at the outset that Indian place-names are fun. They combine the romance of history, real or spurious, with the challenge of a detective story. And this is part of the trouble. Indian place-names seem to have had a greater attraction for the untrained than for the competent students of ethnolinguistics and ethnohistory. As a result we have all too many examples - both amusing and exasperating - of names which have been enthusiastically analyzed by the following procedure: (1) assuming that the name as spelled on a modern map and pronounced by the analyst himself is just what the Indian said: (2) segmenting the name in any way which seemed most convenient: (3) assigning a meaning to the ...words from dictionaries of an Indian language in the same region, assuming that it is the same as the language of the place-name: and, (4) having ignored the Indian grammar altogether, rearranging the bits of English meaning into a grammatical phrase."*

Having been forewarned, let us plunge headlong into a geological detective story. Day's definition of monadnock is not quite the same as the geological definition. Let's look at some of the place-names in Maine and see how they fit with their landscape, bearing in mind Dr. Day's four points.



### Katahdin

Maine's most famous mountain is [Mount Katahdin](#). Its spelling as shown on modern topographic maps is as above, but on older maps and in documents it has been spelled **Ktaadn**, and identified by Henry David Thoreau in *The Maine Woods* as "an Indian word signifying highest land." Day provides the Western Abenaki term for 'great mountain' as **gitaaden**, and for 'a very high mountain' as **ginadena**. Ethnohistorian [Fannie Hardy Eckstorm](#) gives an informative discussion of place-name roots using Katahdin as an example:

*"For example, Katahdin is from the adjective **keght**, 'principal,' and the inseparable **-ad'ene-**, a 'mountain'; but from the first root we retain only the **k** and **t**, and from the second only **d** and **n**, the vowels being inserted for English use. When, in 1736, Capt. John Gyles, who had long been a prisoner to the Indians, wrote 'The Teddon' for Katahdin, he gave a good Indian form, and his definite article correctly represented the first root as a translation of it, while 'Teddon' carries over the final letter of **keght** and contains only two letters, **d** and **n**, of the second root."*



Mount Agamenticus

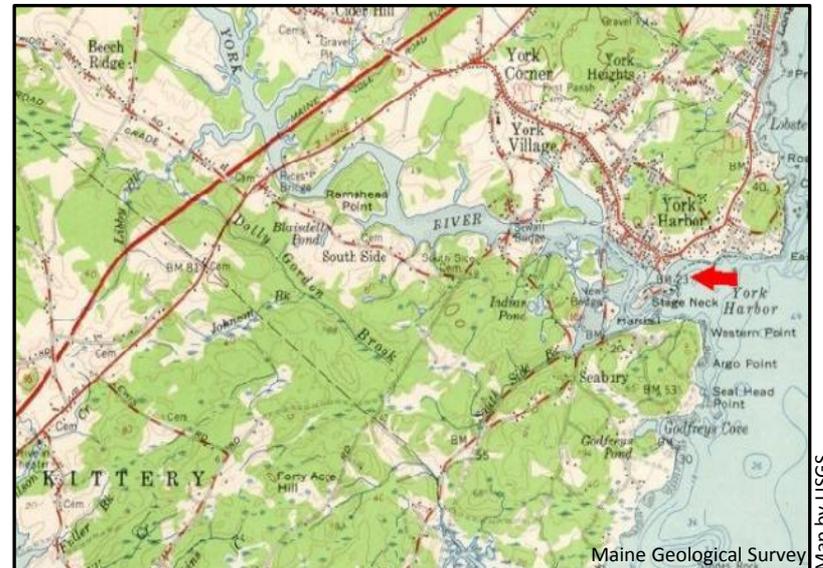
When approaching Maine on Interstate-95, looking to the northwest from the Piscataqua River Bridge one can see Mount Agamenticus (Figure 1) in the distance. Does this name fit the place?



**Figure 1.** Mount Agamenticus as seen from Goochs Beach, Kennebunk.

## Mount Agamenticus

Of Agamenticus, Eckstorm notes that in Christopher Levett's Voyage to New England, published in 1628, he refers to a river called 'Aquamenticus,' which he had applied to the modern day York River, and means 'river on other side' or 'stream across river' (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Portions of the York 1:62,500-scale USGS topographic map. (Left) Location map of Mount Agamenticus. (Right) Location map, mouth of York River, York.

## Mount Agamenticus

She continues:

*"The word is purely a river name; for -ticus means a salt creek or brook. It cannot apply to the mountain some miles away..., yet authorities are in entire disagreement about the meaning. ...The way to settle the matter was to look at the place as an Indian would have done in old times...York River, trending seaward, turns sharply west then east, with a crooked, obstructed channel (hard to navigate on an ebb tide or with a high sea and strong wind outside), as it works its way around the west end of the old bar-island which blocks its mouth. The bar eastward is now built up into a causeway, but in old times, by taking a few steps across it at any time of tide, an Indian could have easily gone from sea into quiet water. This half-tide island was a feature no other river had at its mouth. It is the little river which lies behind an island in its mouth."*

Thus, while the name Mount Agamenticus may be euphonious, as given by the Colonists to the mountain the name would have made no sense at all to an Abenaki speaker.



### Kennebunkport

Kennebunkport is noted today as the residence for one of the families who have their vacation home at Walkers Point. The word 'kennebunk' defied interpretation for many years, according to Eckstorm, until her mentor Dr. William F. Ganong suggested that it was a word of Micmac origin rather than Abenaki. If so, the word would mean 'long bank,' as derived from kini, meaning long, and banek, meaning a bank behind a beach having a raw side, a 'cut bank.'



Photo by J.T. Kelley

**Figure 3.** Great Hill, Kennebunk.



### Kennebunkport

Eckstorm suggests that it was important for the Indians to know where to find entrances to creeks and marshes along the coast during canoe travels. In this instance, she states that the numerous beaches from the York River to Cape Porpoise look similar from the sea, but a prominent feature such as a cut bluff or bank could act as a landmark to a harbor to escape the open ocean. The eroded drumlin, Great Hill (Figure 3), is a long cut bank, bordered on either side by beaches, and could be the recognizable landmark, here located at the mouth of the Mousam River (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Location map, Great Hill, Kennebunk. Portion of the Kennebunk 1:62,500-scale USGS topographic map.



### Bunganuc Stream

An extensive bluff of clay (Figure 5) is found where the stream of this name in Brunswick finds the sea. The bluff is informally referred to as Bunganuc Bluff (Figure 6), and at least one local resident has stated that the word means 'place of white clay.' However, Eckstorm derives it to mean 'boundary brook,' and provides supporting evidence in the form of several deeds from the late 17th and early 18th centuries. She states that the word is common in Massachusetts and Connecticut, certainly referring to Lake Chargoggagogmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg, alias Lake Webster in Massachusetts, and purportedly is translated to mean 'You fish on your side, I fish on my side, and nobody fishes in the middle.'



Photo by T.K. Weddle

**Figure 5.** Bunganuc Bluff, Brunswick.



### Bunganuc Stream

One of the deeds from Maine spells the name of the stream 'Bungomungomug', and refers to the boundary between Brunswick and North Yarmouth (today Freeport), providing support for Eckstorm's interpretation. Other variants on the spelling in the deeds include Bunganumgamok, Bungonuck, Pogamqua, Puggamugga, and Pugganumma. Finally, the transmogrification of the original spoken word becomes complete with 'Puggy Muggy River,' and woe to the linguist who claims to faithfully translate it.



**Figure 6.** Location map, Bunganuc Bluff, Brunswick. Portion of the Freeport 1:62,500-scale USGS topographic map.



## References and Additional Information

There are many other place-names in Maine originating from Algonquian-based words, and there are several volumes listed below that would be helpful for those interested in their possible meaning, as well as the references cited therein.

Cook, David S., *Above the Gravel Bar: the Indian Canoe Routes of Maine* (1985): Milo Printing Company, Milo, Maine, 111 p. and map.

Day, Gordon M., *Western Abenaki Dictionary, Volume 2: English-Abenaki* (1995): Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec, Canada, 460 p.

Eckstorm, Fannie H., *Indian Place-Names of the Penobscot Valley and the Maine coast* (1941): University Press, Orono, Maine, 272 p.

Foster, Michael K., and Cowan, William, editors, *In Search of New England's Native Past, Selected Essays by Gordon M. Day* (1998): University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Massachusetts, 328 p.

Hubbard, Lucius L., *Woods and lakes of Maine* (1971): New Hampshire Publishing Company, Somersworth, New Hampshire, 223 p. (Originally published in 1883. Hubbard was educated in Massachusetts and practiced law in Boston, making frequent trips to Maine. In 1883 he turned to the study of geology at the University of Bonn in Germany and eventually moved to Michigan where he was appointed Michigan State Geologist in 1893.)

Huden, John C., *Indian Place Names of New England* (1962): Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York, 408 p. (A review by Gordon M. Day of this volume can be found in *American Anthropologist*, Volume 65, 1963, p. 1198-1199.)

An online version of Thoreau's *The Maine Woods* can be found at this [website](#)

