

## 7.1 Geographical Place Names Reveal Linguistic and Cultural History

English borrowed only a few handfuls of words from the hundreds of Native American languages that were spoken in North America. Words for some of the animals found here retained their Native American language words: caribou (Micmac), chipmunk (Ojibwa), moose (Algonquian or Narraganset), muskrat (Algonquian, Powhatan?), opossum (Algonquian, Powhatan?), raccoon (Powhatan), and skunk (probably Algonquian) to name a few. Also, words for new foods included squash (Narraganset), pecan (Algonquian, Cree, or Ojibwa), and succotash (Narraganset).

Geographical place names, however, are a reminder of many of those original peoples across our country. When we research what the names mean, what languages they come from, how the words changed, we can learn a lot, not just about the word itself, but about the history of the region and its people.

Look at a map of the United States (or of just your state) which includes many of the small towns, rivers, mountain ranges, in addition to large city names. Conduct some research to find out where those words come from and what they mean or originally meant.

Here are a few examples with just state names:

Alabama – a Creek word for ‘tribal town’

Arkansas, Kansas – a Sioux word meaning ‘south wind people’

Illinois – an Algonquian word for ‘men’ or ‘warriors.’

Michigan – From Chippewa words *mici gama* meaning ‘great water,’ after the lake of the same name.

Texas – Variant of word used by the Caddo meaning ‘friends’ or ‘allies,’ and applied to them by the Spanish in eastern Texas. Also written *texias*, *tejas*, *teysas*.

Utah – From a Navajo word meaning ‘upper,’ or ‘higher up,’ as applied to a Shoshone tribe called Ute.

Conduct some research on the meanings of the following state names, all of which are thought to have come from a Native American language. Some origins are uncertain, so provide all of the theories of the origin of each word, if you find more than one.

Hawaii, Connecticut, Oregon, Missouri, Utah, Wisconsin, Idaho, Wyoming, Tennessee, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Oklahoma.

Research your own state’s name, if it’s not one of the ones listed above. What does the name mean and why was it used?