

The Origin of the Word “Hoosier”: A New Interpretation

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The rough and rowdy rivermen of the old Midwest who floated their loads down to New Orleans were a crude and boisterous lot. Reveling in the derogatory nicknames given them by more proper citizens, the “badgers,” “wolverines,” and “buckeyes” from, respectively, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio joined “suckers,” “pukes,” “red horses,” and “hoosiers” from Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, and Indiana in raising hell up- and downriver. And although no clear record remains as to which specific (and probably disreputable) qualities the “hoosier” label referred, that nickname, like the others, was doubtless meant as a form of sarcastic disparagement.

But time smooths even rough frontier ways, and today the citizens of Indiana proudly proclaim themselves “Hoosiers,” even if they are not exactly sure what a “Hoosier” originally was. Given Indiana’s adoption of the term, it might seem wiser not to inquire too deeply about the derivation of the nickname, but ever since the 1830s Hoosiers have felt an irresistible urge to speculate on possible antecedents for their unusual moniker.

As early as 1848, John Russell Bartlett’s *Dictionary of Americanisms* presented an anecdotal etymology from a correspondent of the Providence, Rhode Island, *Journal*, who suggested that the word “hoosier” developed in New Orleans from the western slang expression “husher,” a ruffian whose deeds or violence could silence his foes.¹ But despite its relatively early provenance, there are serious problems with this derivation. No historical evidence has ever been found of any usage of the word “husher” except for this one account, whereas examples abound for wide and common usage of the word “hoosier.” Secondly, the change in both vowel and consonant sounds between “husher” and “hoosier” is considerable; why change the sound when the word “husher” makes its sense precisely from its relation to the word “hush”? Not surprisingly, the “husher” theory no longer claims many adherents.

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¹ John Russell Bartlett, *Dictionary of Americanisms: A Glossary of Words and Phrases . . .* (New York, 1848), 180.

Bartlett's *Dictionary of Americanisms* added to its anecdotal discussion the information that Kentuckians of the era favored a more comic etymology that suggested the term evolved from a halloing of "Who's yere?" as strangers approached isolated cabins on the Indiana frontier.² This theory proved humorous enough to have enjoyed generations of retelling, but since it, too, lacks evidence of usage and hardly seems a likely way for guests to announce their arrival, few take it seriously.

Neither of these first two speculations was particularly complimentary of early Indiana life, so some state residents adopted more flattering explanations of Hoosier origin. Several argued that the word "hoosier" derived from a mispronunciation of the European term "hussar" attached to Hoosier boatmen in honor of their fighting hearts and manly prowess. Others contended that high-spirited Indiana boatmen were termed "hoosiers" because they liked to jump up and crack their heels together while shouting "Huzza!" But neither the "hussars" theory nor its "huzza" counterpart accounts for the derogatory way the term was actually used in the early Southeast, and neither has ever been taken seriously as a likely etymology by students of American usage.³

In an article published at the turn of the century by the Indiana Historical Society, Jacob Piatt Dunn analyzed all these speculations and more in what has been the definitive study of the origins of the word "hoosier."⁴ To the disappointment of his readers Dunn found no convincing evidence that any of the state's favorite etymologies for "Hoosier" were correct. He thought the way to solve the mystery was to begin by noting that most of the proposed etymologies shared three common features. According to Dunn,

1. They are alike in the idea that the word was first applied to a rough, boisterous, uncouth, illiterate class of people, and that the word originally implied this character.
2. They are alike in the idea that the word came from the South, or was first applied by Southern people.
3. They are alike in the idea that the word was coined for the purpose of designating Indiana people, and was not in existence before it was applied to them.⁵

In Dunn's opinion, the impediment that had prevented a discovery of a correct derivation was that one of those three important clues was a false lead. His own research showed that although the term "hoosier" was, indeed, both derogatory and southern, it had never been exclusively or uniquely applied to citizens of Indiana. Dunn noted that the word "hoosier" existed in southern usage as a

² *Ibid.*

³ Jacob Piatt Dunn, "The Word 'Hoosier,'" (*Indiana Historical Society Publications*, Vol. IV, No. 2; Indianapolis, 1907), 3-29. Unless otherwise cited, the evidence presented in this paper is available in greater detail in the Dunn article.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

common slang term for uncouth rustics probably before it was ever applied to Indiana's frontiersmen; moreover, "hoosier" continued to be used in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee as a general derogatory term for people characterized as crude bumpkins long after Indiana's Hoosiers thought they had claimed the nickname for themselves alone.

Yet while Dunn discovered that the term "hoosier" seems to have come westward from the southern frontier of Virginia and the Carolinas across to Tennessee and then northward to Indiana, he still lacked the definitive etymology for which he was searching. Some thought there might be a vital clue in the term "Hoosieroon" (or Hoosheroon) by which John Finley characterized the denizens of an Indiana backwoods cabin he memorialized in his 1833 Indianapolis *Journal* poem, "The Hoosier's Nest":

To seat him by the log heap fire,
Where half a dozen Hoosheroons,
With mush and milk, tincups and spoons,
White heads, bare feet and dirty faces,
Seemed much inclined to keep their places...⁶

Charles G. Leland recalled, in the 1839 *Dictionary of Slang, Jargon and Cant*, that in 1834 he had heard that Hoosiers were really "Hoosieroons" which could suggest, he thought, a Spanish origin for the term.⁷ Dunn concluded, however, that the word in the poem was a humorous take-off on such racial terms as "quadroon" or "octoroon" that were in common southern American usage.

Another trail Dunn followed was the theory that Hoosier might have been the surname of a man who hired Indiana laborers for the Louisville and Portland canal. But after he failed to find any remaining Hoosiers listed in the city directories of a dozen of the region's major cities, he rejected the idea, adding that the name "Hoosier" J. Durbin that had been found listed in the 1835 minutes of the Indiana Methodist Conference was the result of a misspelling of the name "Hosier" J. Durbin and therefore irrelevant.

Having thus disposed of other theories, Dunn concluded that the term "hoosier" must be from an old Anglo-Saxon word, even if the connections between the western frontier and the original (and missing) old English slang term could not be found. As an addendum to his original work he appended the supposition that the trans-Appalachian word "hoosier" probably arrived with immigrants from Cumberland County, England.

Dunn's evidence for the Cumberland theory was that the 1899 edition of *A Glossary of the Words and Phrases pertaining to the*

⁶ From John Finley, "The Hoosier's Nest," *Indianapolis Journal*, January 1, 1833, quoted in Dunn, "The Word 'Hoosier,'" 7.

⁷ Albert M. V. Barrere and Charles G. Leland, eds., *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon and Cant* (2 vols., 1839; reprint, Detroit, 1967), I, 473.

Dialect of Cumberland showed that the Cumberland dialect contained a similar word, “hoozer,” “said of anything unusually large.” There are, however, four problems with this derivation: there is no evidence of an American usage of the Cumberland word; “hoosiers” were never characterized as unusually large people; the opening consonant sound of the second syllable of “hoozer” (hu-zer) sounds quite different than that of “hoosier” (hoo-zher); and, most disconcerting of all, the allegedly original term dates to at least a half-century later than its supposed successor.⁸

Scholars wishing to explain idiosyncratic “southernisms” have long tended to fall back on hypothetical Anglo-Saxon survivals isolated in the back country. But recent scholarship had shown that a far more common source for many such local southern customs is the invisible heritage of African-American tradition.⁹ Interestingly, in the years when the term “hoosier” was finding its first use on the Appalachian frontier, there was an obvious African-American point of reference for the designation: the black evangelist Harry Hoosier who accompanied the Reverend Francis Asbury and other Methodist preachers on their traveling rounds.

Hoosier was illiterate when he took his name so that his surname has no definitive spelling.¹⁰ But the spellings his contemporaries gave it—Hoosier, Hosier, Hossier, Hersure, Hoshure, Hosure, and Hoshur—suggest the phonetic character of what must have been his own pronunciation.¹¹ “Black Harry,” as Hoosier was

⁸ When William Dickinson published his 1878–1879 revision of *A Glossary of Words and Phrases Pertaining to the Dialect of Cumberland* (London, 1879), the word “hoozer” either was not yet in existence in England or was not yet recognized by word hunters there. “Hoozer” did not make its first appearance in this volume until E. W. Prevost updated the glossary in 1899, long after the word “hoosier” was in common usage in America.

⁹ See the many examples noted in William D. Piersen, *Black Legacy: America's Hidden Heritage* (Amherst, Mass., 1993).

¹⁰ There is suggestive evidence that Hoosier was born around 1750 near Fayetteville, North Carolina, then moved, or was sold, to the Perry Hall plantation owned by Henry Dorsey Gough near Baltimore. Gough, who was reportedly converted to Methodism by hearing the prayer of an elderly slave, built a chapel at Perry Hall that became a favored stopping place for itinerant Methodist preachers.

Hoosier knew only the sound of his name, not the spelling. How he chose his name is unknown. Neither of his masters seems to have been named Hoosier or Hosier, although the name Hooser according to Jacob Piatt Dunn “is a rather common family name in the South.” See Dunn, “The Word ‘Hoosier,’” 17.

It has been suggested that Black Harry may have gotten his name from the term “hoosier” rather than the other way around. But there is no evidence the term existed at such an early date; moreover, it is unlikely that, as a free man, the serious and devout Hoosier would have taken for his surname a cognomen which meant a shiftless, ignorant bumpkin. Slaves might be given derogatory first names, but a surname different from the master's was the choice of the freedman who held it. The best source for information on Harry Hoosier is Warren Thomas Smith, “Harry Hosier: Black Preacher Extraordinary,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theology Center*, VII (Spring, 1980), 111-28.

¹¹ I have chosen to use “Hoosier” as the spelling in this article for obvious reasons. For the man himself, all that counted was the pronunciation; and for that, considering the contemporary variants that survive in print, Hoosier probably comes closer to the sound than the Hosier spelling which is now more conventionally used. See Smith, “Harry Hosier,” 125.

known, was born a slave around 1750, gained his freedom, and by the turn of the century had become a well-known Methodist exhorter despite the disability his race presented in that era and despite his own illiteracy. Small, very dark, physically powerful, and keen-eyed, as well as an enthusiastic orator, Hoosier was nominally a servant to the white ministers with whom he traveled. He usually preached at the meetings with them, however, and was generally considered the most effective and popular speaker.¹²

Indeed, Black Harry was such an impressive proselytizer that Benjamin Rush conceded that “making allowances for his illiteracy he was the greatest orator in America,” and Thomas Coke contended his traveling companion was even more blessed, “one of the best Preachers in the world.”¹³ Before his death in 1806, Hoosier’s homiletical gifts had made him a renowned camp meeting exhorter, the most widely known black preacher of his time, and arguably the greatest circuit rider of his day.

Of course, not everyone in early America looked with favor upon illiterate black preachers who preached to both white and black audiences, nor were more conservative southerners impressed with the whites who would heed a Negro’s admonitions on proper conduct and the way to salvation. Hoosier was particularly disliked by Virginia Baptists for his preaching against the Calvinist proposition that those who were once in grace would always remain in grace.¹⁴

Throughout the southern frontier Methodists were not only slighted as unsophisticated and unlettered but they were also denigrated for calling into question the virtues of racial slavery. The promiscuous mixing of blacks and whites that took place at frontier camp meetings was just another serious mark against both their breeding and good taste. Therefore, it does not seem at all unlikely that Methodists and then other rustics of the backcountry could have been called “Hoosiers”—disciples of the illiterate black exhorter Harry Hoosier—as a term of opprobrium and derision. In fact, this would be the simplest explanation of the derivation of the word and, on simplicity alone, the Harry Hoosier etymology is worth serious consideration.

There seems to have been a connection on the Appalachian frontier between slang terms for members of the rural population and disparagement of their religious activities. When Anne Royall

¹² John Lednum, *A History of the Rise of Methodism in America* (Philadelphia, 1859), 282. There is a cartoon-like drawing of Hoosier in Elmer Talmage Clark, *An Album of Methodist History* (New York, 1952), 169, and a portrait in Edward D. Smith, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder: The Rise of Black Churches in Eastern American Cities, 1740–1877* (Washington, D.C., 1988), 35.

¹³ Rush and Coke are quoted in Smith, “Harry Hosier,” 116.

¹⁴ *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer Talmage Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton (3 vols., Nashville, 1958), I, 403, entry dated May 21, 1781.



HARRY HOOSIER
1750[?]-1810

Courtesy United Methodist Publishing House.

described the term “red-neck” in 1830 in what was the first recorded American use of the term, she reported it to be a sarcastic religious reference to frontier Presbyterians in North Carolina.¹⁵ Methodists would have been equally likely targets for such scorn, and connecting them to Harry Hoosier, even if he had preached in the middle and northern states, would have been considered funny in 1800.

It is likely that, as memories of the preacher “Black Harry” slipped away, and as the white people of the frontier adopted the nickname Hoosier for themselves, the term lost its original racial connotations (except perhaps for the implications of “Hoosieroon”) and came to mean simply an illiterate, ignorant, and uncouth yahoo.

Historians would quarrel less over the original meaning of “Hoosier” if there existed historical examples of the ways in which its early usage was understood. Lacking such evidence, the best that can be done for any of the theories is to develop a circumstantial case. The etymology suggested here—that the word “hoosier” was used sarcastically to characterize frontier backwoodsmen as primitive followers of Black Harry Hoosier and his mixed-race, antislavery, Methodist frontier democrats—is admittedly as circumstantial as all the other hypotheses. But at least the Harry Hoosier connection would explain several problems that the other etymologies cannot.

Only Dunn’s speculation about the Cumberland “hoozer” and the new Harry Hoosier hypothesis can account for the word’s demonstrated geographical usage pattern which suggests a westward movement from the Appalachian frontier of Virginia and North Carolina. The other theories—“husher,” “Who’s yere,” “hus-sar,” “huzza,” and the like—all depend either on indigenous Indiana origins or on river sources in Louisville or New Orleans. Such origins are not supported by the evidence that shows the places and ways in which the word has been used.

Early usage of the word “hoosier” in the North and West was less derisive than it was in the Southeast. “Hoosier” was considered far more disparaging in the areas of its heaviest use—West Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley, and the upper piedmont of Virginia. In fact, in the upper South the term “hoosier” quickly displaced the earlier condescending appellation “cracker,” which survived as the derogatory term of choice for poor whites in the lower South regions of Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida.¹⁶

¹⁵ Anne Royall, *Mrs. Royall’s Southern Tour* (3 vols., Washington, D.C., 1830–1831), I, 148, as cited in David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford, 1989), 758.

¹⁶ On regional usage and difference in the meaning of the words “hoosier” and “cracker,” see Raven I. McDavid, Jr., and Virginia McDavid, “*Cracker and Hoosier*,” *Names*, XXI (September, 1973), 165–66.

Of the two Appalachian theories the Harry Hoosier hypothesis best explains such clines of use. An original antislavery and African-American reference in the term would explain why “hoosier” was charged with more negative connotations in the South than it was in the North and West and why the cognomen settled on the inhabitants of the free and more Methodist territory of Indiana after passing lightly over similarly uncouth frontiersmen in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky who were also often called “hoosiers.” An implicit reference to Harry Hoosier in the earliest use would also explain the dividing line between the usage of “hoosier” and “cracker,” for that line also marks the southern limit of Harry Hoosier’s preaching tours.

In the end all the etymologies are circumstantial. But the best of the group in explaining how, where, when, and why the term came into use is the theory that the word comes from a man’s name. Such an etymology would offer Indiana a plausible and worthy first Hoosier—“Black Harry” Hoosier—the greatest preacher of his day, a man who rejected slavery and stood up for morality and the common man. Indianans have always been proud that through their own accomplishments they reshaped the definition of “hoosier” into a title borne with pride:

With feelings proud we contemplate
The rising glory of our State;
Nor take offense by application
Of its good-natured appellation.¹⁷

It is also likely that in improving the reputation of Hoosiers in general, the citizens of Indiana have brought the meaning of “hoosier” back closer to its worthy origin.

¹⁷ Quoted in Dunn, “The Word ‘Hoosier,’” 22.