

## The Meaning of "Tassinong"

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I presume that readers of the INDIANA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY are interested in historical accuracy; and in this centennial period, when public attention is being focussed on our history, it is desirable both to correct errors that have crept into our history in the past and to prevent the introduction of new ones. For this reason any writer announcing a new discovery, or advancing a novel theory, should cite his authorities; and if he fails to do so his statements should receive close scrutiny.

On these principles, I venture to question the derivation of "Tassinong,"—the name of a village in Porter county—advanced by Mr. Hubert Skinner in his article, "The Era of Tassements, or Stockaded Trading Posts," in the September number of this magazine. He states that during the period of French occupation of the Mississippi Valley—1670 to 1763—the stockaded posts of the French were called *tassements*, and says that *Tassinong* is a corruption of this French word.

Mr. Skinner does not cite any use of the word *tassement* in this sense. On the contrary he says:

"The very word *tassement* has dropped out of use in both its French and English forms. It is not now to be found with the definition of 'palisade' in any dictionary or cyclopedia that is in use. It is rarely used in any sense. \* \* \* French scholars and teachers, people of wide reading and culture, will tell you today that they never heard or saw the word *tassement* in all their lives. You may search for it in vain in the modern French lexicons and cyclopedias. It is only in the rare writings of centuries gone that you can find it."

How remarkable! The word *tassement* will be found in any good French dictionary with its definition of a subsidence, sinking or settling, especially of a building; but never as meaning "a stockaded trading post." In the monumental *Grand Dictionnaire Universel*, of Larousse, which is supposed to give all obsolete and provincial words, there is no such definition. In the Abbe Coron's *Vocabulaire a l'Usage des Canadiens Francais* there is no such definition.

But, if in the French period "there were *tassements* erected all

along the shores of the lakes and of the Mississippi and its eastern confluents," as Mr. Skinner states, there ought to be common mention of them in the letters from these regions during the French period. I have had occasion to go through a large amount of that literature, but never found any mention of these *tassements*. In the large collection of letters and papers of this period, and this region, known as the New York *Colonial Documents* there is no mention of a *tassement*. In the Thwaites collection of *The Jesuit Relations*, 71 volumes, there are no less than sixty mentions of stockaded posts, forts, villages, missions, etc., but no use of the word *tassement*. They are usually called *palissades*, and occasionally *palissade de pieux*, *fort de pieux*, or simply *des pieux*. I submit that Mr. Skinner should specify the "rare writing" where he finds this word used in this sense.

As to the mode of corruption of the word, Mr. Skinner says: "By an old rule for rendering French words in English equivalents, the French syllable *ment* was always written *mong* in English, and in such words as this the middle vowel was represented by 'i' to make sure that the word would be pronounced in three syllables. Thus the English equivalent of *tassement* was *tassimong*." But, unfortunately, *tassement* is not pronounced in three syllables, and the "a" is not short; so that the English equivalent would be *tahss-mong*. Our verbal corruptions are usually on phonetic lines. We successfully corrupted *Lac du Chemin* to Lake Dishmaugh, and *Marais de l'Orme* to Mary Delome, but nobody could make *tassimong* out of *tassement* on phonetic lines.

Mr. Skinner gets rid of his "m" by saying: "Old maps of Porter county, likewise, are the last in the world to bear the name Tassimong, accidentally varied by the substitution of 'n' for 'm' and written Tassinong." But why old maps? Tassinong appears on recent maps of Porter county; and on what map, or in what document did Tassimong ever appear? And if such a change were made accidentally on one map, why was it perpetuated not only on maps but also in local usage? Mr. Skinner himself says: "The earliest settlers of the country always called it 'Tassinaw.'" Had they also accidentally substituted an "n" for an "m"?

But, if the *tassement* theory be discarded, can any rational theory of the derivation of *Tassinong* be suggested? I think so. In a history of Porter county published in 1882, in whose preparation Mr. Skinner assisted, I find at page 187 the following: "The town of

Tassinong, or Tassinong Grove, as it was formerly called, is indeed an ancient place. Its origin seems to be shrouded in obscurity. The whites trace the locality back to 1830, but the Indians spoke of it as an old place even then. *Not that there was any town, but simply a locality bearing the name.* It is *probable* that there was a French trading post here at a very early day."

Here is a plain statement that *Tassinong* is an Indian place-name, in a tradition recorded 33 years ago, and with no known reason for questioning the accuracy of the record at the time it was made. The name itself confirms the tradition, for the ending "ong" is the common Algonquian terminal locative—varied to onk, oong, ung, unk, ing, or ink, in different dialects and with varying phonetic ideas of white writers. The name evidently means the place of something; but of what? The place was originally called Tassinong Grove. A grove of what? If the place were in Miami territory I should guess "Place of Plums," for the Miami word for plum is *tassamin* (all the vowels short), in which "*min*" is the generic word for berry, seed or fruit, and "*tassa*" is the descriptive element. But this is Potawatomi country, and I do not know the Potawatomi word for plum. It might be the same as the Miami, for the two languages are very similar. If there were originally plum thickets in this vicinity, the probability of this meaning would be strong.

It is not, however, "probable that there was a French trading post here at a very early day." French trading posts were not so numerous as to escape mention easily; and they were established for business purposes, with two essentials: (1) they must be close to customers, and (2) they must have facilities for transportation of merchandise. In the early times transportation was almost wholly by water, and it would not have been good business to locate a trading post at an inland, out-of-the-way place like Tassinong, when there were plenty of accessible places within a day's journey.

Incidentally, while on the Indian subject, I would warn readers of the *Magazine* as to the absurd story of the cause of Pigeon Roost massacre by Herman Rave, published in the Indianapolis *News* of October 1. Those familiar with Mr. Rave's record as a newspaper faker would not be misled, but others might be. There is no occasion for doubt as to who perpetrated the massacre. It was the work of a war party of twelve Shawnees, led by Missilemetaw, who was captured a year later at the River Raisin, and gave the whole story to Colonel Johnson.

If there had been a suspected band of Delawares in the neighborhood, as stated by Mr. Rave, there would have been a second chapter to the story, for on the day after the massacre there were 200 frontiersmen gathered at the place, thirsting for vengeance. There were in fact no Delaware settlements nearer than the West Fork of White river. Mr. Rave's story of the cause of the massacre—that an Indian climbed a hollow tree in pursuit of a coon, and fell through a hole into the inside—ought not to attract much credulity. If he had said an Indian climbed a hole in search for a tree, and fell into a coon, people might have believed him. In reality there was no local cause for the massacre except the exposed situation of the settlement. It was merely a feature of the general outbreak, which was shown in the attack on Fort Harrison on the same day.