

Native peoples of Arkansas and the origin of the state's name

Like many place names in the state, the word "Arkansas" has its roots in a Native American term, transliterated into French, then transformed again by English-speaking settlers and developers of the 19th century.

When French explorers first visited this region in the late 17th century, they encountered a native nation living in the Mississippi delta country whose members called themselves "Ugakhpa," meaning "the downstream people." The French variously rendered this name as "Kappa," "Cappa" or "Quapaw," this last becoming today's accepted transliteration of the original Dhegilan Siouan name.

Another term applied to the Quapaw came from Algonkian-speaking natives who accompanied early French expeditions into the Mississippi country. These guides called the Quapaw "Akansa," or "people of the wind." French, then Spanish and finally English-speaking travelers and settlers rendered this name as "Acansae," "Arcansa," and otherwise. An 18th-century French map first styles the Arkansas River as such; the same map refers to the Quapaw as "les Akansas."

After the province of Louisiana was bought by the United States in 1803, the name and, apparently, its pronunciation remained fluid for some decades. In 1811, American soldier and explorer Zebulon Pike dubbed the area and river "Arkansaw," likely reflecting common pronunciation. Others, after Pike, insisted on pronouncing the name stressing the middle syllable and the final consonant, as "Ar-KANSAS." In 1881, over four decades after statehood, the General Assembly ultimately resolved that the state's name should be spelled "Arkansas" but pronounced as "Arkansaw."