

## No More “Real Men”!

Sorry guys, the latest linguistic research reveals that the word “Illinois” never did mean “the real men,” as the explorer/priest Father Marquette thought. A more accurate translation provides the less sexy “He/she speaks in the regular way.”

Berkeley Algonquian language specialist Dr. David J. Costa, who has done extensive research on the Indigenous languages of this region, explains that the term ‘Illinois’ probably comes from the old Myaamia-Peewalia (Miami-Peoria) word *irenweewa*, later pronounced *ilenweewa*, (plural *ilenweewaki*). For those who like to know the details, *iren* means ‘regular/ordinary’, *wee* means ‘by speech’ and *wa* means she/he.

However, this is only the start of the story. It turns out that the Ojibwa people (who live north of the Great Lakes) pronounce this word slightly differently. Just like American English drops the extra vowel out of British English ‘aluminium’ to get ‘aluminum’—the Ojibwa were in the habit of dropping the *wa* from words that they borrowed from neighboring languages. They shortened *ilenweewa* and said “*ilinwe*” (plural *ilinwek* sometimes written as *ilinoïek*). Add French spelling to “*ilinwe*” and bingo -- you get ‘Illinois’ pronounced “ileenwa.”

One more step -- add English pronunciation to the French spelling and you get close to the name of the state as we say it today (“ilinoy”). So, the name of the state comes to us from the Miami-Peoria Indigenous language spoken in this region, via Ojibwa and French.

Although “the Illinois” was widely used by the French and English in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as a collective name for the several distinct groups of Indigenous peoples of the region, it was never what they called themselves. French missionary sources reveal that the most common collective name used was *Inoka*, the original meaning of which is unknown. Just think, if, the state had taken the name the Indigenous peoples called themselves --like North and South Dakota -- we might all be at the University of Inoka.

## Summary:

*Illinois/Illiniwek* comes from the Myaamia-Peewalia<sup>1</sup> word *irenweewa*, which is a compound word:

*iren* + *(i)wee* + *wa* (+ *ki*)  
Ordinary + by speech + 3<sup>rd</sup> person ending animate plural

“He/she speaks in the regular/ordinary way.”

It could also be pronounced *ireniweewa* and was later pronounced *ilenweewa* or *ileniweewa*. Gravier’s Illinois French dictionary (circa 1700) records *irenweewa* as meaning “He speaks Illinois.”

One of the early attestations of the name “Illinois” is in the *Jesuit Relations* (Vol 50: 288) where in 1666-67 the missionary Claude Allouez, then based at Saulte Ste Marie, wrote *ilinoüek* (pronounced *ilinwek* -- the variant would be *iliniwek*). But in the Illinois language this would be *irenweewaki* which has a different ending and vowels. It looks much closer to the plural this word would take in old Ojibwe –*ilinwek*, with the singular form *ilinwe*. Ojibwe regularly deletes the final –*wa* from words borrowed from neighboring Algonquian languages, so we get

Illinois-Miami = *iren* + *(i)wee* - (*-wa -ki*)

Ojibwa = *ilin* + *we* (+*k* = plural)

French spelling = “Illinois”

So the term comes from the Illinois language into Ojibwe then borrowed into French as “Illinois”

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<sup>1</sup> This language is one of the Algonquian family of North American Indigenous languages. It is also referred to as “Miami-Peoria” and “Miami-Illinois” in the linguistic and ethnographic literature. Myaamia and Peewalia are so closely related in their grammatical structure and vocabulary that linguists consider them two dialects of the same language, just like American English and British English. Prior to European Settlement and Indian Removal in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Myaamia-Peewalia was spoken primarily across the lands that are now the states of Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, western Ohio and adjacent areas along the Mississippi River. Since the 1990s the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma has worked to revive use of the language in a joint project with Miami University of Ohio. See <http://myaamiacenter.org/>