

Chicago Still Ain't the Onion
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Colloquium: D'Arcy McNickle Center
Newberry Library

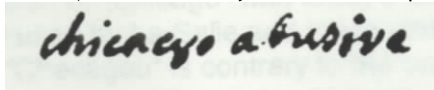
In this research on the history of the word Chicago, original source documents -- maps and texts -- have been carefully consulted. In this research, revising previous etymological investigations, earlier dates for the word that became 'Chicago' have been identified on a map (1684) and in a text (1680). They both point right to LaSalle.

Primary Finding

On the basis of this research, principle conclusions are:

- The explorer La Salle popularized the word that became the city's name. He literally put it on the map. There is no evidence that 'Chicago' was used before 1680, the year LaSalle used it.
- 'Chicago' is not an Indian word for 'onion', 'skunk', 'place of the onion', or 'place of the skunk'. The onion theory has long proposed that the Chicago name was an Indian word for an indigenous, repulsive smelling plant, this plant, in turn, borrowing its name from the skunk.
- There is *only one* anecdotal comment (1688) by an *anonymous informant* connecting the place name with the plant.

Le Boulanger's French/Miami-Illinois dictionary (1720) has three Indian words for 'onion.' One is /chicac8o/ (read "8" as "oo") - it is the *word for skunk* -- championed by the onion theory. It has the word 'abusive' written next to it.

A photograph of a handwritten note on aged paper. The text is written in cursive and reads "chicac8o abusive". The "8" is written as a small circle with a horizontal line through it, resembling a zero with a slash.

Might our English dictionaries have next to it the designation 'slang,' 'vulgar,' or 'offensive'?
Might our anonymous wordsmith who offered the abusive skunk-word been making a joke?
LaSalle's word seems to be homonymous with the Indian word--food for punning, to be sure.

Secondary Findings

1. The earliest orthographic representation of the word in documents is /checagou/ (or /chekagou/). The spellings of 20th Century research, /chicagon/, /chicagoua/ , and many others, are not legitimately early.
2. Chicago, in its earliest uses, was a route that included today's Chicago River, the land carry, and the Des Plaines River over its course to the Illinois River. This original geography was published in detail in the 1920s by the Chicago Historical Society.
3. Spellings ending in /-on/ have no historical legitimacy. They were spawned by a typo in a book published in 1714. In the particular Indian languages, the /-on/ would mean 'at the...', or 'place of the...' (technically /-on/ is a 'locative'). The book should have printed /-ou/, not /-on/.

