Chocorua Redux: Revisionist History of a Name

Legends about Chief Chocorua and the mountain that is his namesake have become entrenched in the canon of a local history invented in the 19th century. Little scholarship has been applied to the subject since. Tourist brochures and Wikipedia pages repeat the story of an Indian prophet or chief who welcomes English settlers to Tamworth around 1720, loses his wife in an epidemic, and befriends a family, the Campbells. When Chocorua's son dies of accidental poisoning (the potion prepared variously for foxes or wolves) while in the care of the Campbells, a grief-stricken Chocorua pledges revenge, and when Campbell's wife and children are later found murdered, Chocorua is blamed. He is pursued up the mountain, is fired upon and wounded, and leaps from the summit to his death after uttering a curse (Mudge 1992: 30):

> "Lightning blast your crops! Wind and fire destroy your homes! The Evil One breathe death on your cattle! Panthers howl and wolves fatten on your bones!"

The curse afflicts the valley over the next century, until it is learned, for example, that the cattle are being sickened by mineral-contaminated soil. Meanwhile, there was no "Evil One" in Algonquian metaphysics. Most spirits were capable of evil if not treated right. The settlers were quite taken with Hobomock, however, a Wampanoag (not Abenaki) bogeyman whom the English equated with Satan. The Chocorua legend comes mainly from works of fiction rather than historiography, especially stories by abolitionist and early women's libber Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880), who in 1821 also wrote a children's morality tale entitled *Hobomock*.

Algonquians, including the Abenaki-speaking peoples living in the Tamworth area, traditionally practiced sorcery, so hexing or cursing would have been routine. The famous shaman Passaconaway (Papisseconewa) reportedly went on retreat into the White Mountains for months at a time to work at getting rid of the Europeans by casting spells, coming out periodically to see if they were working. (They were not, which may be among the reasons he abdicated to his youngest son Wonalancet in 1660.) However, Native curses traditionally invoked spiritual interventions and magical transformations and did not give actual agency to land, water, or mountains to effect curses.

Indian curses on geographic features because of maltreatment by whites was a 19th century Anglo-European invention and literary genre. Curse stories became widespread throughout the Americas, and in the early 20th century writers such as Howard Lovecraft popularized them in horror fiction later amplified by Hollywood. It's been suggested that curse legends were means of retribution, acknowledgements of the grievous harm done to Native Americans during the Contact Period. There is a Saco River Curse, for example, in which 3 white people have to drown each year in retribution for the harassment of an Indian woman and her infant in their canoe by 3 white rowdies that resulted in the death of the child. Local whites kept a tally well into the 20th century, which, with regular accidental drownings, had the effect of making the curse "real". (As a species we do love our prophecies!)

In other versions of the legend, sans curses, Chocorua falls off the mountain accidentally while hunting, commits suicide by jumping off the mountain when pursued by angry whites, or throws

himself off a cliff to escape flames from a fire set by angry settlers to smoke him out. There is even a version in which Chocorua exiles himself to the mountaintop to keep his promise of neutrality toward the English and leaps to his death in despair when fighting breaks out. To a historian, the need for so many versions of the death scene raises suspicion, for multiple outcomes in a legend often conceal a simpler but undesirable truth. In this case, the simpler undesirable truth is that in the 1720s Massachusetts Bay Province colonists were able to apply for scalp commissions from the governor and were encouraged to commit genocide.

In 1725, for example, the ex-ranger John Lovewell led a group of 88 scalp hunters from Dunstable, who killed and scalped a band of 10 Abenaki near Wakefield, NH for a bounty of 100 British pounds per scalp. The deaths were later avenged in an ambush, the Battle of Lovewell Pond—another whole story. As late as 1755 Lt. Governor Phips offered 300 pounds for every enemy Indian scalp, a powerful motivation. An unknowable number of colonists enriched themselves in this way on the frontiers. So the version from a later time frame--about a warrior being trapped at Chocorua Lake on a spit of land (commemorated by a statue on a spit of land there today) and then being hunted and scalped by whites for bounty--is perhaps the most plausible one. An early account (Willey 1857) gives this view: Chocorua is cornered on the mountain by a scalp hunter, begs not to be shot because of his steadfast allegiance to peace with the English, is refused, and commits suicide by jumping off a cliff.

The versions of the legend involving suicide raise a red flag, however. Suicide was not the Algonquian way. Culturally, grief was not a trigger for self-harm, and a warrior in a desperate or hopeless situation would have flung himself at his enemy to be killed rather than throw himself off a cliff. Suicide took the form of very high-risk behavior or self-endangerment—suicide by cop, one could say. An Abenaki warrior would more likely have sacrificed himself in a violent confrontation and gone down fighting.

There are a couple of other cultural anomalies to consider. For one thing, Algonquian place names do not name people. The reason is that places outlive people. Naming places after individuals risked encouraging malevolent spirits by saying their names after the individuals had died. The reason was that speaking the name of a deceased person risked recalling the spirit back from the skyworld, something to be avoided at all costs. You wanted to keep all your deceased's spirits safely in the stars where they could do no harm.

Furthermore, geographic features—such as mountains, lakes, peninsulas—were sometimes named for subsistence resources found there or subsistence activities that took place there, but never for events. According to Longfellow's romance, Chief Jeckovya fell off the mountain, and in other versions, Chief Chocorua leapt off the mountain. But the mountain would have had a name before any such person or event and would never have been renamed to commemorate a person or event, and certainly not a death, whatever the means.

A Chief Chocorua is not mentioned in Abenaki legends, and there is no leader by that name in surviving Abenaki oral traditions, as one would expect. The earliest English primary-source accounts also do not mention any Chief Chocorua. He may have been a composite persona with an emblematic identity representing the local group of Native Americans as a whole. This conflation of identities was a common practice in life as well as in fiction, in which a single

person, real or invented, hero or villain (e.g., Hiawatha, Sitting Bull), became famous as a projection or representation of the larger population.

But the legends describe in some detail the warrior's actions and his family members—a son named Wenane, a daughter by the name of Mineola—even if they erroneously have him leading both the Cocheco Massacre in Dover in 1689 and the Battle of Lovewell Pond in 1725; so perhaps there was a real person whom the English called Chief Chorocua. If so, he would not have been a "chief". Chief, clan, tribe, nation, king, queen, and sovereignty are all European concepts, based on European history. Europeans applied these constructs to Native people, who ultimately adopted them for their own. At the time of contact, however, the Abenaki were organized as patrilineal bands, led by sagamores (*sogmoh*), the heads of high-ranking families who inherited their status and acted as stewards of their lineages and homelands. Sachems (*sakhem*) were elected leaders of allied bands. Whoever he was, his Native name would not have been Chocorua, though, because it was not the custom to name an individual after a mountain and vice versa. The real name of the warrior of legend, if he existed, is lost to history.

The real name of the mountain is another story. The mountain would already have had its name from pre-Contact times, well before there was any individual warrior to be recorded in 18th century history or folklore. The first mention was *Coruway*, referring to the mountain, pond, and river, but that was nearly 50 years after European contact, and it was another 30 years after that before the word *Chocorua* appears in records along with reference to a person by that name.

1766 References in primary source accounts to Coruway mountain, pond, river.
1784 Jeremy Belknap records Corua for the name of the mountain.
1791 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow writes a romance about "Chief Jeckoyva".
1791 "Chief Chocorua" appears in Belknap's History of New Hampshire.
1828 The artist Thomas Cole refers to "Mt. Chocorua" in the title of a painting.
1830 Lydia Maria Child invents the Campbell story with Chief Chocorua's suicide, etc.
1870s Lucy Larcom bestows inventive Native placenames.

The name originally given and recorded for the mountain was *Corua,* which Jeremy Belknap recorded in his 1791 history of New Hampshire. *Coruway* is a corruption, an example of a common form of corruption of Algonquian place names in which the English added the dipthong /ey/ to Native words ending in the vowel /a/. There are many other examples.
The name *Corua* derives from an Algonquian dialect not spoken in the Tamworth region. It would have been an Eastern Abenaki word, possibly Mi'Kmaq or another /r/ dialect. Abenaki was a Loup language, so called, in which the /r/ sound was not pronounced in all dialects. That sound was substituted for by an /l/ sound or an /n/ sound in the other Loup dialects. For example, Merrimack with the /r/ sound is Eastern Abenaki. Western Abenaki with the /l/ dialect, such as the Pennacook, called the Merrimack the Melodomak, and those with the /n/ dialect, such as the Kennebec, called it the Monomack. Dialectical differences thoroughly confused the Europeans and is the main reason there are so many alternative spellings of Algonquian place names. Ancestors of the Pigwacket (Pequawket) may have been the speakers of the eastern /r/ dialect that gave the mountain its Corua name.

Corua is a pre-Columbian word, loaned into Spanish, for a kind of "snake"—in particular a serpent that guards a mountain spring. Serpents are very prominent in Native American spiritual

beliefs, not only in New England but throughout the Americas. Serpents are messengers from the underworld, or water world--very dangerous, but very useful. Crevices in rocks in high places, especially mountains above 1000 feet, were where spirits like the water serpent lived.

Choc comes from an Eastern Algonquian word for heavily eroded rocks, such as occur in the aptly named Chic-Choc Mountains in the Gaspe in Quebec. There is a *choc* in the name for Mt. Washington as the home of the Great Spirit (*Agiocochook*, *Agiochocook*). Such rocks had the crevices in which spirits preferred to dwell. Thus, *Chocorua* most likely originally referred to the rock home of the water guardian serpent assumed to be living on the mountain. Interestingly, the Northern Water Snake (*Nerodia sipedon*) is commonly found on Mt. Chocorua today.

Chocorua probably means "Home of the Water Serpent". The Wonalancet River, Bearcamp, and other waterways that run through Tamworth drain from Mt. Chocorua, and those streams have widely fluctuating seasonal flows. Places like Pitcher Falls dry up in times of drought, for example. Algonquians believed that offending a water serpent or killing one, even accidentally, could cause a water source to dry up. It would have been extremely important to Native people living in the Tamworth valley to have a water serpent on the mountain to propitiate. Ancestors of the people living on the Saco River, or those who were here before them, most likely named the mountain for the spiritual guardian of its headwaters. Ultimately, of course, we can never really know for sure.

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