



photo credit: Leslie Ficaglia

Misty Maurice

The Maurice River (pronounced Morris) is said to have been named for a local legend, in which a Dutch ship called Prince Maurice was sunk on the river by Native Americans in 1657.

During the great depression the Works Progress Administration (WPA) employed out-of-work writers as part of the federal New Deal program. This was known as the Federal Writers' Program, and among other endeavors they tackled the source of many of the nation's place names. A document entitled *The Origin of New Jersey Place*

Names resulted from the 1938 New Jersey Writers' Project. They compiled lists of current and past names for governmental and geographic subdivisions of the State, gleaned information from "local histories, recorded and unrecorded folklore, and personal interviews with local officials and history-minded residents." The document states that they assembled 930 names whose authenticity has been reasonably established. For the Maurice River, their studies substantiate the legend, noting "Prince Maurice or Orange and Nassau: ship, Prince Maurice, burned by Indians."

Furthermore, the New Jersey Writers' (NJW) project cited at least nine sources for origins of Native American names. In our state a number of places are known to have derived their names from Native American words. For instance, Weehawken has been translated from Delaware Indian (Lenape) origins to mean "place of gulls" (NJW). Yet other translations include "rocks that look like trees" and "maize land." The Lenape language is no longer in use and therefore these efforts are sketchy at best.

Before the colonists adopted the name of the Maurice River, American Indians called it

Wahatquenak. While assigned to St. John Bosco Church in Millville, Monsignor Ciaran O'Mearain researched the derivation of that name at the local library's Millville room. He fancied that the parish cookbook should be entitled Recipes from the Wahatquenak. The Monsignor devoted his homily one Sunday to his discoveries. A colorful speaker and a scholarly sort, he said that his best guess as he studied the name was that it meant River of the Rising Mists.

Hearing his proclamation delighted me. We live on the west bank of the Maurice so we are treated to sunrises. Furthermore, being married to a builder has made us habitual early risers, and therefore we are treated on fall mornings to the very mists that inspired the native Americans' name for their river. Indian artifacts are found on the high west banks of the Maurice and I envision that they too loved looking across the marsh plain as cold air kissed its warm surface, giving a mysterious drama to the sun's daily début.

As you may know, our other Wild and Scenic Rivers are the Manumuskin, Menantico, and Muskee rivers. The New Jersey Writers discovered two sources: Anthony & Brinton, Lenape English Dictionary, 1888 and Bolton, Indian Life Long Ago In The City of NY, 1934. Each provides translations to help us understand these rivers' names as well. Using both sources, the Manumuskin was described as deriving from Menen: to drink and muskee: as swamp ink place. So one might interpret the name as "drinking of the dark swamp." (It seems fitting to mention that the Manumuskin is also one of only two pristine rivers in the Pinelands. The other I understand to be Black Run in Evesham, NJ.) That interpretation covers the Muskee as well, leaving us with the Menantico River that, according to Anthony & Briton, means "covered swamp."

This all seems to be getting a bit murky or swampy, bringing me to one parting thought. I've had a number of role models in conservation; Helen Fenske, a former NJDEP commissioner, is one such person. She, along with others, was instrumental in the protection of one of New Jersey's crown jewels, "The

Great Swamp.” And it is with these words that I wish you to consider labeling every swamp GREAT, for it is the swamp that provides abundant habitat and cleans our waters. In fact, swamps are considered the most productive ecosystems on the planet. So when you think of southern New Jersey and getting a little sand in your shoes, you should also consider getting a little mud on your boots.