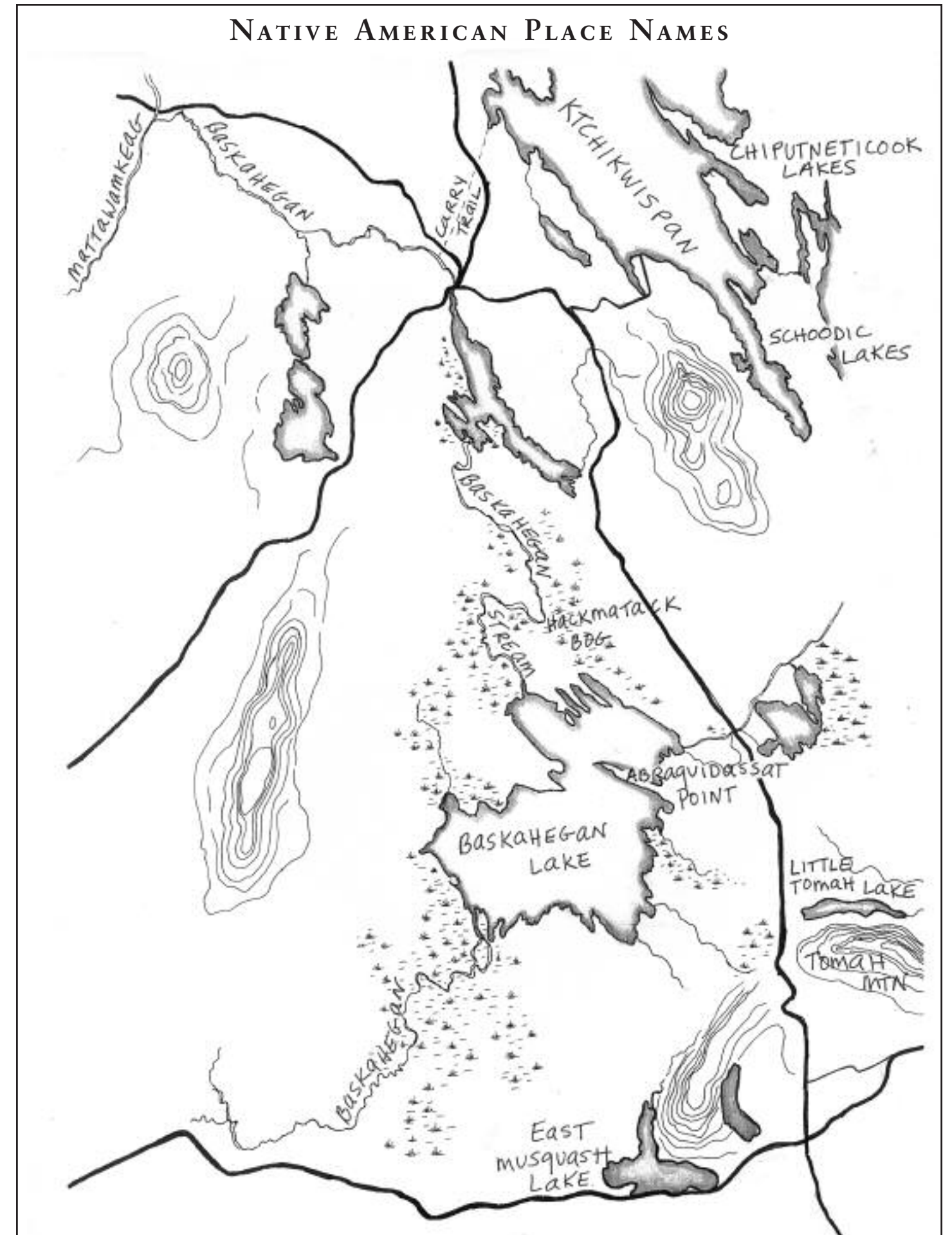


# NATIVE AMERICAN PLACE NAMES



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"These old names are the colored curtains which hung beside the windows through which we look back into the beginnings of human living here; for ages and ages countless human beings have lived and toiled and suffered here, and have left only these names."

—F. H. Eckstorm,  
1941 Indian Place Names of the Penobscot Valley



A view of Baskahegan watershed and the Crooked Brook Flowage.

# NATIVE AMERICAN PLACE NAMES

Before the first Europeans set foot in Maine, native people traveled the coastal and inland waterways, following seasonal patterns of hunting, gathering, and raising corn, beans, and tobacco. These tribes are the Penobscot, the Passamaquoddy, and their close relatives, the Maliseets, and the Micmacs. Collectively, they are Wabanaki—People of the Dawn. They are of the land of the far eastern shores, the land where the sun first rises.

It is unclear which Wabanaki tribal group used the Baskahegan region the most. The closest tribal village or settlement was probably at the confluence of the Mattawamkeag and Penobscot rivers. Penobscot people concentrated their activities on the main stem of the Penobscot River, and probably would have ventured as far as Baskahegan Lake only on extended hunting or trapping excursions. Passamaquoddy, or pollock people, were centered on the coastal areas we now know as Passamaquoddy Bay, and northwest along the watershed of the St. Croix River.

Archaeological evidence suggests there has been human presence in the Baskahegan region for at least six thousand years. (Dale Wheaton interview, Milliken, Cook, Speck) The names the region's first people attached to the land can tell us a great deal about how they lived.

Many places were named by Native people, in birch bark canoes, traveling upstream pursuing prey, eluding enemies, or visiting relatives in other villages. Since these first people depended on stories and oral traditions to convey their understanding and knowledge of the landscape, the names they gave to places tended to create a visual image in the traveler's mind of rough rapids, good fishing or hunting spots, or the beginnings of carry trails. For Native people, place names served as verbal maps of their mapless landscape.

For example, descriptive place names would have served as critical

We find Native American place names on our maps and in our language today, and even a very basic understanding of their structure can help us interpret what they mean, and how they served as navigational aids to early travelers. For example, the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy place name endings *-keag*, *-ok*, *-ek*, *-unk* mean *at the place or where*. *Mattaseunk* stream means *place where it makes a sound*; *Medunkeunk* stream means *where there is an irregular bank*.

Though we often apply Native names to whole rivers, or lakes, they usually refer only to specific places. While we use the word *Mattawamkeag* to refer to an entire river, for example, the word *Mattawamkeag* means *at the raised gravel bar*, and refers only to a point at the confluence of the Penobscot and *Mattawamkeag* rivers.