

Native Place-Names of the Lower South: A Technological Exploration

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In expanding an investigation of native place-names of just Florida to neighboring states (which I term here “the Lower South”—that is, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina and Louisiana²), I attempted to discover how accessible the etymologies are to a non-specialist audience. My goal back then was—and continues today to be—to trace these place-names to their source languages and to reveal parsings and proposed meanings. At the same time I wanted to explore the extent to which the Internet would be useful in such a study and to find traditional, printed sources that are readily accessible to the public. So, I was primarily concerned with resources that would be available to the amateur investigator, and this paper focuses on the tools found and used.

In fact, the Internet was largely unhelpful as an etymological tool. Google-type Internet text searches ranked by “number of hits” turned up information repeated over and over usually from the same source (and often with little acknowledgment of that source). If the original source was in doubt or in error then the large numbers of people citing that source lends a false impression of certainty and authority. For instance, searching *Tallahassee* yields numerous sites offering meanings of “old town” in Muskogee or “abandoned fields” in Apalachee or Hitchiti. And while the first part, *talla-*, can be traced to Muskogee (*e*)*tv**lvv* ‘town, tribal settlement’, *vhassē* appears **not** to be the Muskogee word for ‘old’;³ rather it means ‘rancid’, rendering the earlier meaning of *Tallahassee* ‘rancid town’. This may simply be a reference to the Hitchitis, whose old pejorative designation was Stincard, as throughout William Bartram’s *Travels*—however, the English term may be derived from a Muskogean source as a loan rather than a translation⁴ (Wright 1986:18); I was unable to verify any Apalachee or Hitchiti source for *Tallahassee*. Regardless of its Hitchiti,

¹ This paper was originally given on May 1, 2004, at the Names Institute, Baruch College. I thank the audience for feedback on the orally presented form of this study. I can be contacted at nevisj@earthlink.net.

² My initial corpus of over twelve-hundred place-names was built from material gleaned from reference materials published by Covington, Foscue, Hodge, Morris, Read, Stewart, and Harder. After I discarded a few hundred entries on the grounds of being more recent namings (i.e. subsequent to the removal of the 1800’s) or being of uncertain origin or from a source not indigenous to the region, or for a handful of other reasons, the database now stands at over eight-hundred Muskogean-derived entries and two-hundred fifty items derived from non-Muskogean sources.

³ Muskogee derivations are cited in traditional orthography as used in Martin and Maudlin (2000), whereby *v* represents the vowel /a/ and *a* represents long /a:/; *ē* is /i/ and *e* is long /i:/.

⁴ Wright observes that the original reference of *stinkard* was to the Natchez, and this is true also of the Oxford English Dictionary, where a 1777 quotation indicates that the Stincards constituted a Natchez non-noble class, but was later used to refer to any non-Muscogulge group such as Hitchiti, Yuchi, and Alabama. Wright suggests that the English term *stinkard* could have come from a Muskogee word *estenko* meaning “worthless hand” but generalized to “inferior”. However, the form is probably related to *estanetv* ‘to stink, to be rank’.

Apalachee or Muskogee origin, the more likely etymology ‘rancid town’ doesn’t come up in an Internet search for Tallahassee.

With the Internet more akin to a rumor mill than to a library, the better sources for reliable etymological information come from printed sources available in bookstores and libraries, and this observation derives from the advantages of peer-review for publication versus the near absence of any scrutiny for web sites.

The Internet was nevertheless useful for two other roles. One valuable resource is the National Geographic Names Database at <http://mapping.usgs.gov/www/gnis/gnisform.html>, a part of the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), which with over 2.5 million name records in the database identifies official names for natural and cultural features and populated places. I used this database for confirming each entry in my corpus to ensure that the place-name is still in use and not just derived from a historical source but subsequently fallen into disuse. This is important for a second resource from the Internet: making technological tools available. This project used the Online Map Creation site at http://www.aquarius.geomar.de/omc/make_map.html to generate maps with the places listed in my database.⁵

⁵ Some caution is required insofar as the two tools discussed differ in the units used: at the time this study was done GNIS listed locations in degrees-minutes-seconds; OMC requires coordinates to be in decimal format. Thus the degree-minute-second data had to be converted (using a free downloadable program: DegMinSec.exe from Mentor Software) —otherwise the GNIS coordinates would be in the wrong format for OMC mapping.

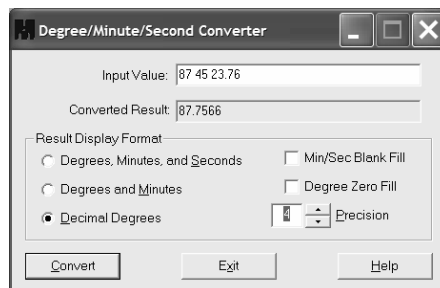


Figure 1: Online Map Creation site by Martin Weinelt

OMC Intro About GMT How To... Projections More INFO

The OMC input form

If you are about to generate your first map with the OMC, please visit the "How-To"-page.

BASIC PARAMETERS

MAP BOUNDARIES: North:
West: East:
South:

MAP PROJECTION:

OPTIONS:
 grid on map
 national boundaries
 state and province boundaries of the Americas
 rivers and channels

DOWNLOAD:
 download disabled
 Postscript (EPSF)
 Adobe Illustrator
 bathymetry
 topography
 b/w map

PLOT LOCATIONS

plot some cities
 plot DSDP sites
 plot ODP sites

plot user defined locations
Please give DECIMAL CO-ORDINATES!!
longitude1, latitude1, name 1
longitude2, latitude2, name 2 ...

```
-85.1049, 36.2958,  
-86.1550, 32.2247,  
-85.1049, 36.2958, Nettlescreek Creek  
-86.1550, 32.2247, Aokid
```

connect locations (track mode)

annotate locations (e.g. city name, site number)

PLATE BOUNDARIES

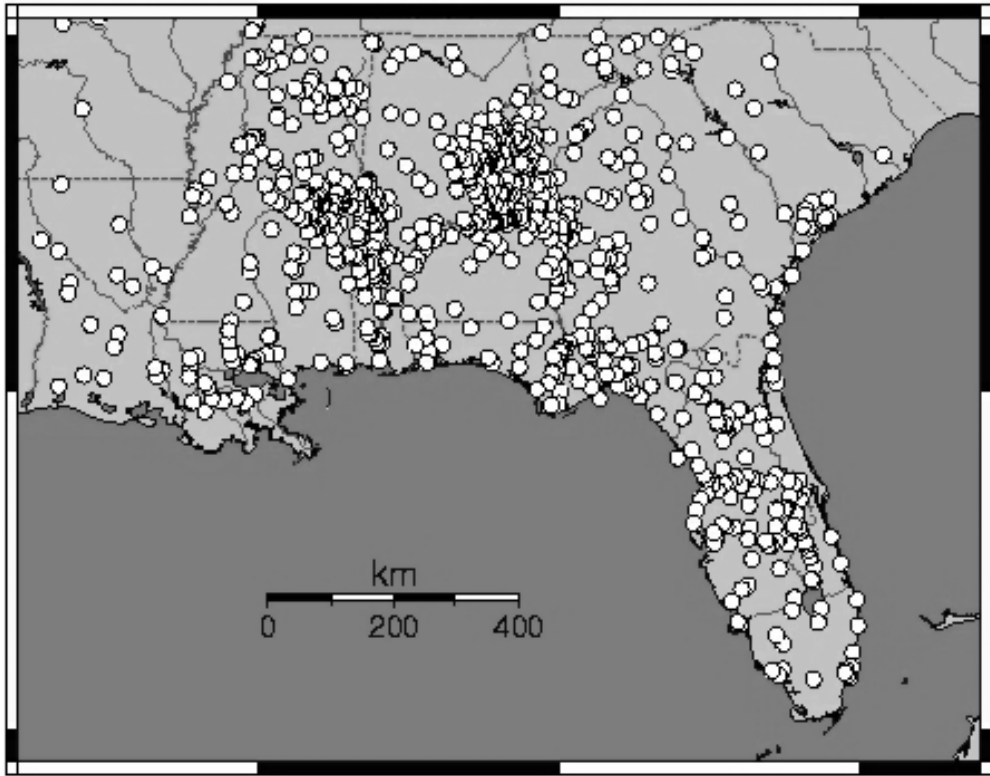
Ridges
 Trenches
 Fracture Zones
 Transform Faults
 Strike Slip Faults

OTHER PLATE TECTONIC FEATURES

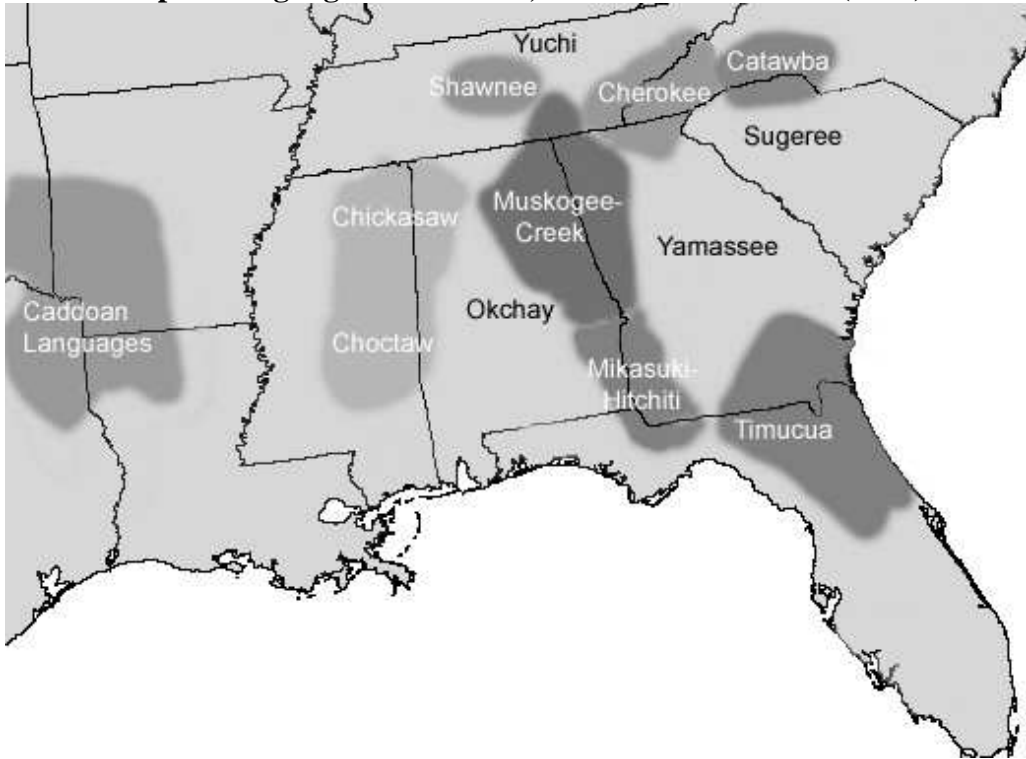
Fracture Zones
 Magnetic Lineations

With these tools we can more easily reevaluate the data in the project as geographically plausible or not. Map 1 contains all the places listed in my database. Patterns emerge even from a glance at this map: two large clusterings are apparent—one in central eastern Alabama and the other in southwest Alabama and southeast Mississippi. These clusters correspond somewhat well to the traditional areas attributed to the Muscogulges (Muskogee-Creek speakers) for the first clustering and to the Choctaws for the second, as shown in Map 2.

Map 1: Native Place-Names Of The Lower South

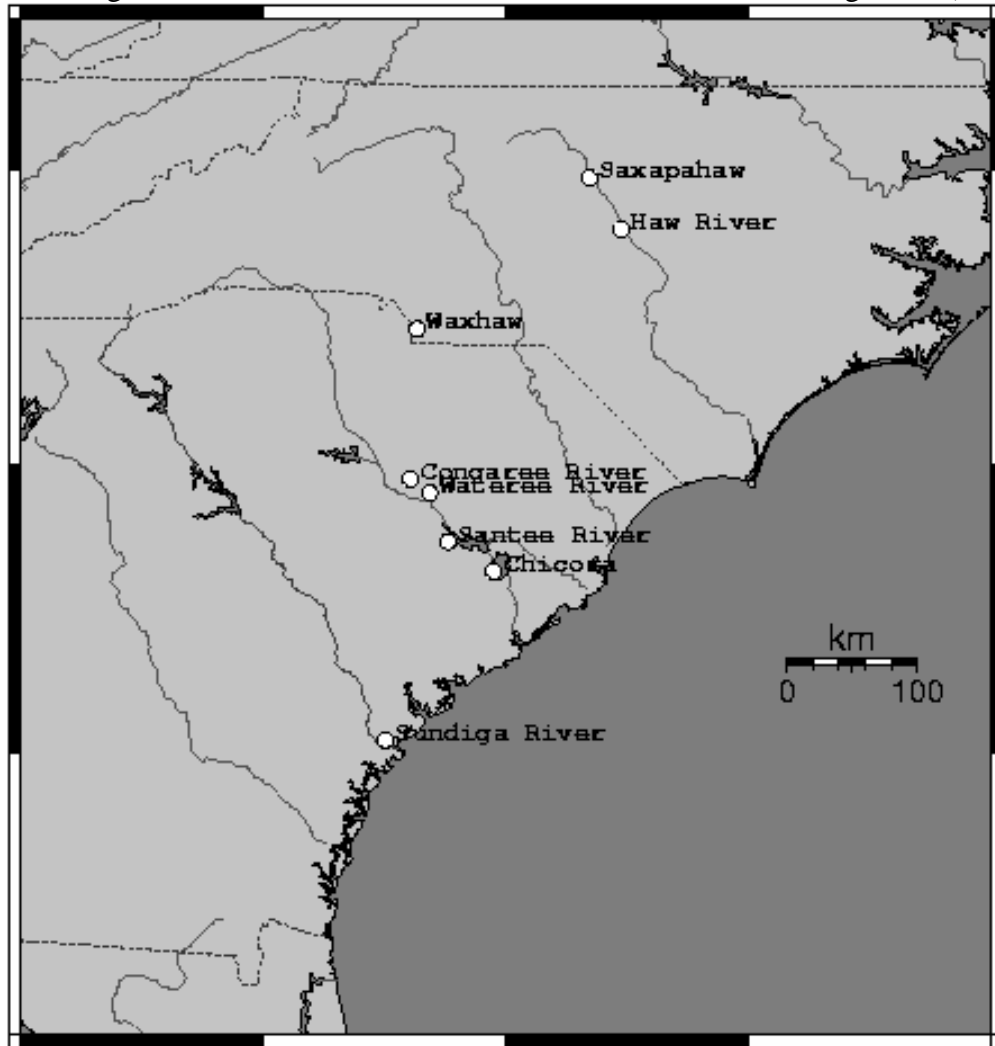


Map 2: Languages And Tribes, Based On Sturtevant (2004)



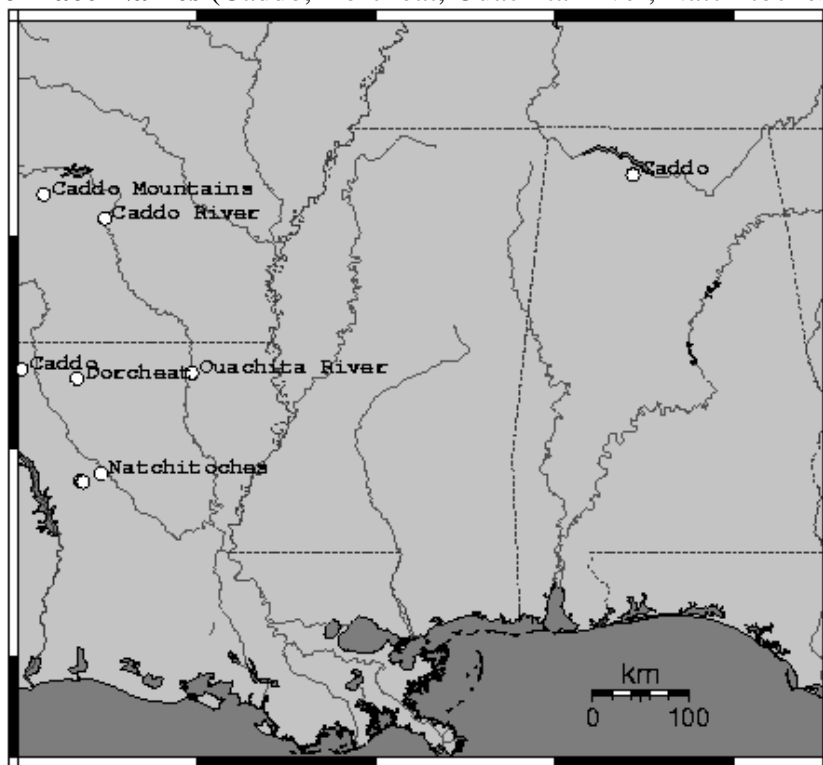
There need not be a huge amount of data for us to recognize a correlation between the maps generated online and traditional native areas. For instance, my corpus contains relatively few Catawba entries or Caddo entries, but the respective place-names are largely limited to areas where these groups were historically known to exist: Catawba (Map 3) and Caddo (Map 4).⁶ Similarly, my three dozen Hitchiti-Mikasuki entries reveal a slight clustering in southwest Georgia and southeast Alabama (Map 5)—perhaps somewhat further northwest than Martin’s map, but here it is apparent that mappings of this sort do not tease out the time depth among the place-names: the widely spread Florida place-names are most likely a later migration than the Georgia and Alabama ones.

Map 3: Catawba Place-Names (Saxapahaw, Haw River, Waxhaw, Congaree River, Wateree River, Santee River, Chicora, Sundiga River)

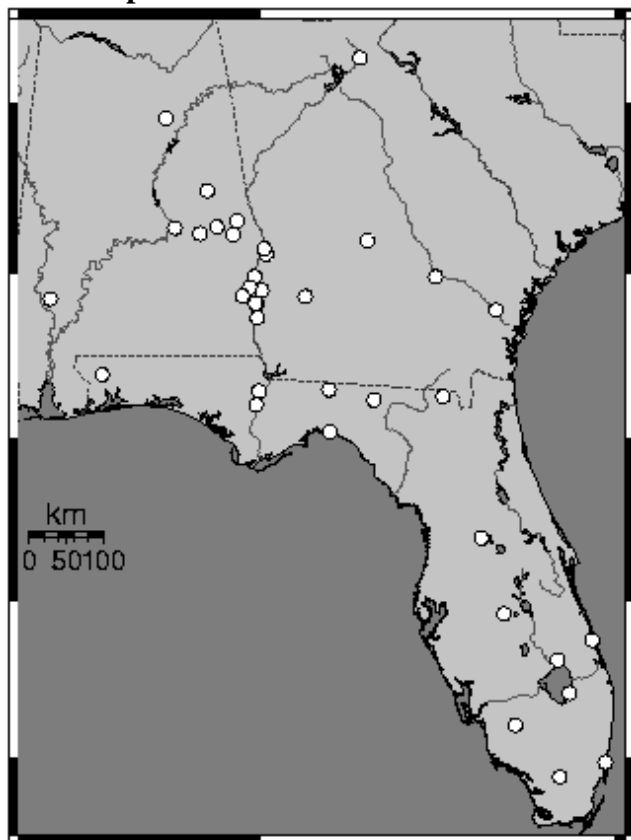


⁶ What the minimum number of entries is for this approach to work is wholly unclear—how few are too few? In general, quality of sources trumps quantity, but the more entries there are, the more confident we are of the results, such that higher quantity can make up for poor quality, yet I have no metric for quantifying what the exact cut-off point is.

Map 4: Caddo Place-Names (Caddo, Dorcheat, Ouachita River, Natchitoches/Nacogdoches)

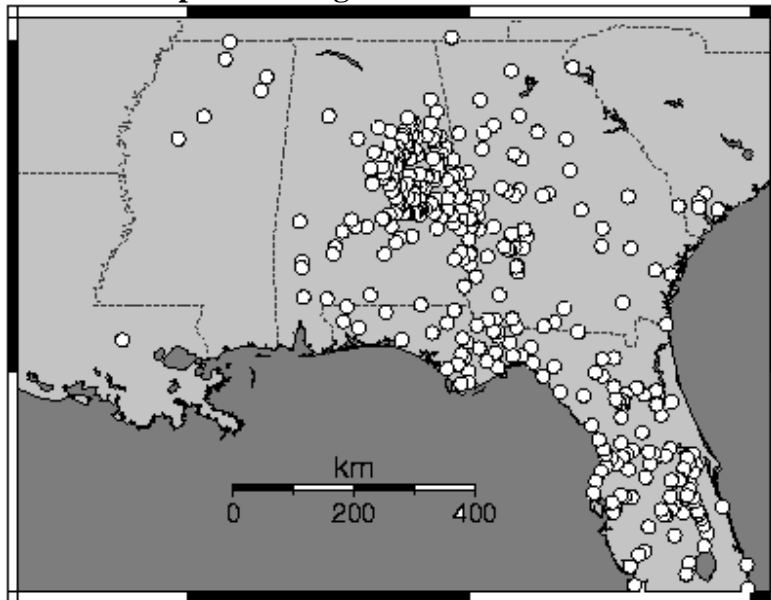


Map 5: Hitchiti-Mikasuki Place-Names

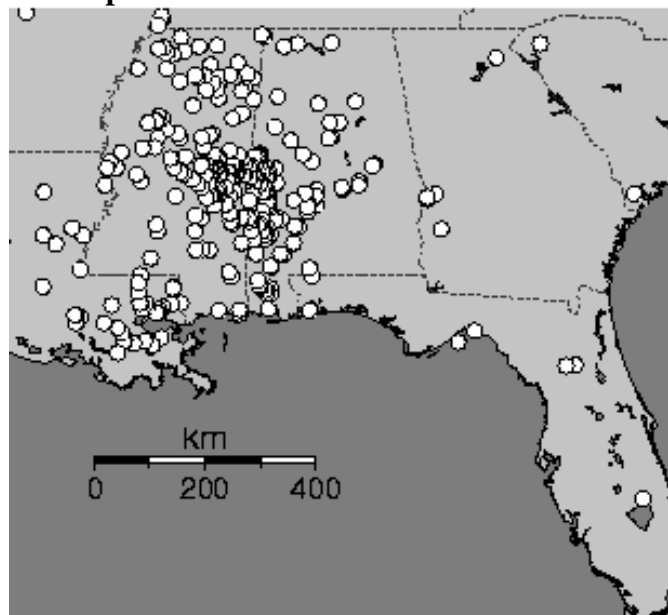


Where there is a large body of data as with Muskogee/Seminole-Creek (over four-hundred entries, Map 6) and Choctaw-Chickasaw (over three-hundred entries, Map 7), the peripheral place-names on those maps demand further scrutiny. Some interesting results emerge at the boundaries between groups or at least at the edges of groups. With fewer than two dozen entries traced to Timucua (Map 8), these place-names largely confirm Martin's situating of the Timucuan in Georgia and northeast Florida (Sturtevant 2004, see Map 2 above), but possibly pushes their linguistic range further south to Tampa Bay.

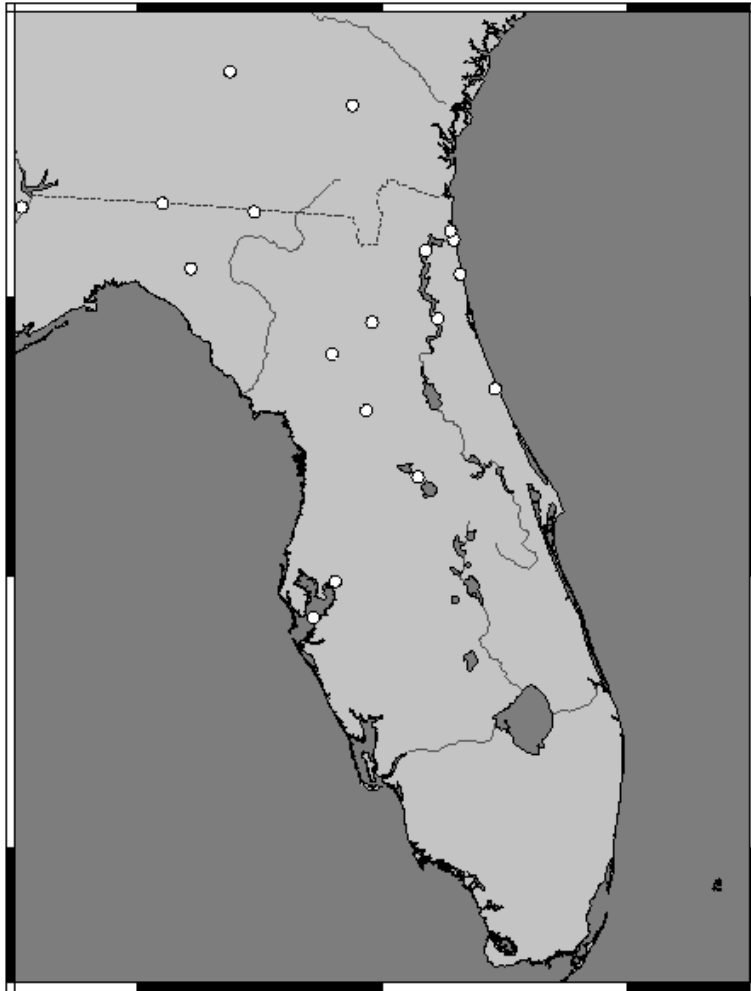
Map 6: Muskogee-Creek Place-Names



Map 7: Choctaw-Chickasaw Place-Names



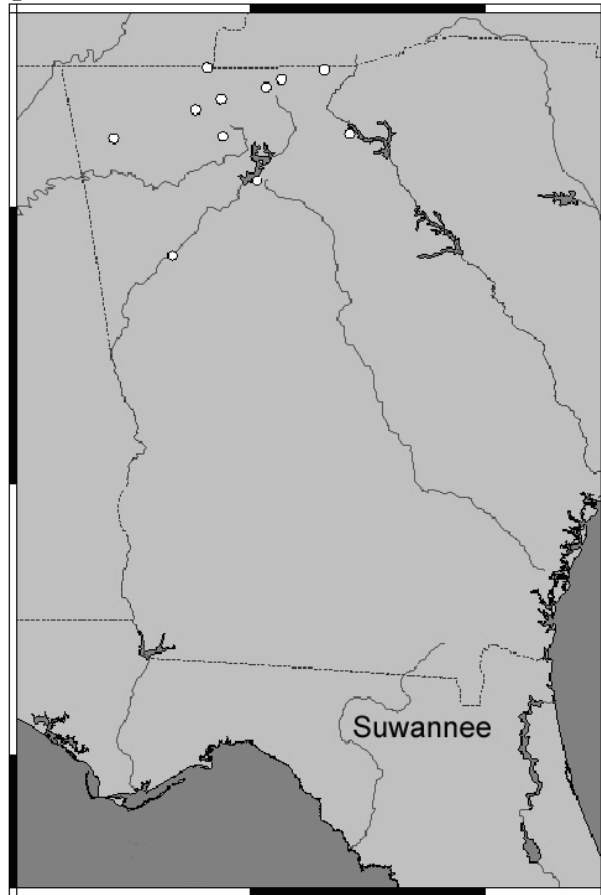
Map 8: Timucua Place-Names



Also, the methods used here can be used to bring specific etymologies into doubt. The Cherokee place-names within the region circumscribed by my study are to be found in northern Georgia (Map 9), apart from one place-name in southern Georgia and north Florida, namely *Suwannee*. The Cherokee derivation is a good phonetic fit (*suwani/sawani*⁷ ‘echo’) though there are also two rival derivations: one from Spanish (namely the name *San Juan*) and one from the eponym of the Shawnees. The Cherokee proposal then might be a better phonetic fit and therefore preferred, but to be doubted on geographical distance.

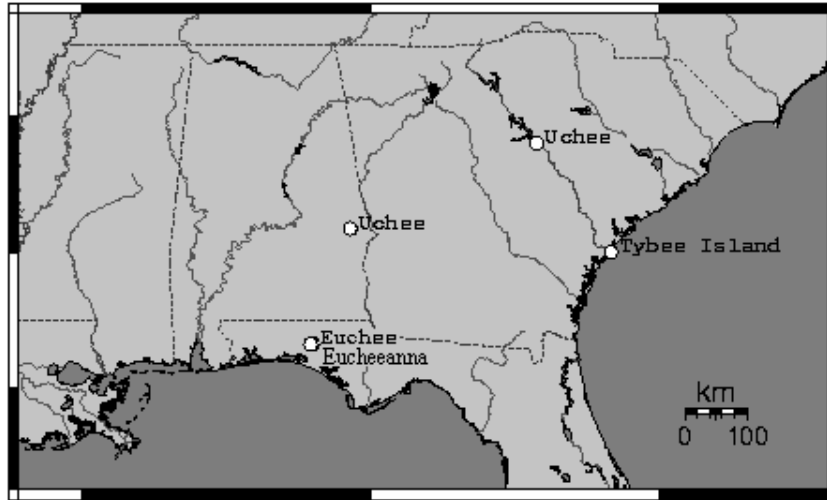
⁷ I have not been able to verify that there is such a word *suwani/sawani* in Cherokee; one typical source is Krakow (1999), who cites a former Cherokee village, whose name was said to be of Muskogean origin, possibly meaning ‘echo’, or named for the Shawnee Indians (page 216), though later the village is said to have been Seminole with a former Cherokee origin (page 217).

Map 9: Cherokee Place-Names south of Tennessee



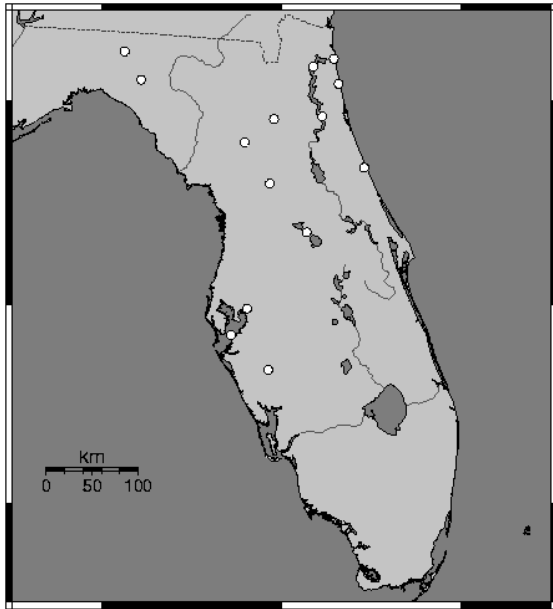
And where the methods appear to fail is where there is no prolonged historical habitation as with a migratory group such as the Yuchis, who emerge in Tennessee (Map 2), later in places in east Georgia, Alabama, and northeast Florida: Map 10). Where the place-names are spread out thinly, any evidence based on quantity of data becomes less firm.

Map 10: Yuchi Place-Names

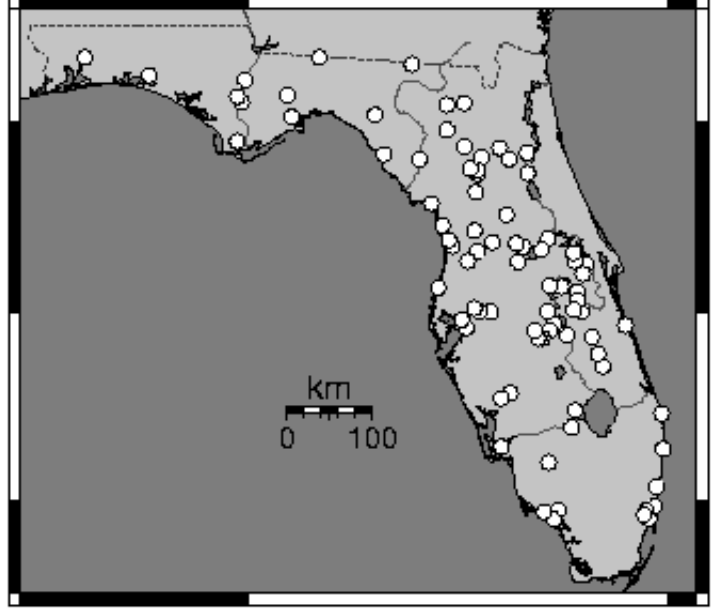


A second shortcoming stems from the flat historical view presented by the data: these mappings easily suggest spatial superimposition of ancient groups where there might not have been much temporal overlap. Consider the Seminole-Creek place-names versus the Timucua names in Florida (Map 11, Map 12). The Timucuan population was already decimated before the 1650's due to disease, slave raiding and other attacks (Milanich 1995) and a little over a hundred years later the remaining few Timucuaans departed with the Spaniards to Cuba when Florida was ceded to Great Britain. The influx of the various groups known collectively as Seminoles begins in earnest in the early to mid 1700's with the first of the Seminole-Creek and Mikasuki towns in Florida (Milanich 1995:233, Covington 1993:9); these peoples, pressured by the aggressive British colonists and their native allies, migrated to a depopulated Florida, at first settling abandoned mission sites (Milanich 1995:233–234). Some overlap must have occurred or we would see no continuity of the Timucuan names to the present. Thus these mappings comprise a time-exposed series of snapshots that may be overlaid or juxtaposed, but the composite may not always result in a coherent collage.

Map 11: Timucua Place-Names in Florida



Map 12: Seminole-Creek Place-Names in Florida



A third shortcoming is a technical one: Streams are not represented well where coordinates pinpoint a single latitude-longitude dot on the map rather than a line. Usually one has to choose between the mouth of a stream and its source, or some compromise in-between.

Conclusions

In building and refining a database of place-names, I have utilized some publicly available online and downloadable tools (GNIS, Weinelt's Online Map Creation, and Mentor Software's degminsec.exe). Citing the unreliability of etymological data culled uncritically from the Internet, I invoked GNIS as a mapping tool, with its quantity of data. These map-creation tools generate visual representations that assist in the critical evaluation of proposed etymologies. Because geographical mapping is used as a check on etymological claims and because the tools utilized are publicly available online or downloadable as freeware, the role of the Internet was explored as a research tool. I proposed that these names still reveal a resilient correlation with traditional locations of Native Americans prior to the removal of the 1840's.

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