A FOOTRACE, A CHERRY TREE AND A MISSING LETTER

How Kalamazoo Got Its Name

From a Jesuit's route notes of about 1760 to the act of 1836, and the stories that grew up afterwards

1744–1827

The River's Name

1744	Bellin's French map of the lakes marks an "R. Marameg" on Lake Michigan's east shore, where the Kalamazoo should be. DISPUTED
c. 1760	A Jesuit's route notes, in the papers of Father Pierre Potier at Detroit, name a "little" and a "great" kikanamaso. The oldest spelling yet found, with an N.
1820	4 September: with Governor Lewis Cass's expedition, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft "passed the river Kikalemazo." The first L we can find.
1821	29 August: the Treaty of Chicago reserves a tract "at the village of Match-e-be-nash-she-wish, at the head of the Kekalamazoo river."
1822	The Carey & Lea map of Michigan Territory letters the river "Kikalemazo R."
1827	The Treaty of St. Joseph takes back the reserve.

1829–1853

Bronson Becomes Kalamazoo

1829	Titus Bronson settles on the site. On 29 October the county is laid out.
1830	30 July: Kalamazoo County is organized, and its northern half becomes the township of Arcadia.
1831	12 March: Bronson and Stephen Richardson record the plat of the Village of Bronson, the county seat.
1833	A jury of six fines Bronson $4.62½ over a cherry tree cut on unclaimed land (the court record, as Kekic quotes it in 1984).
1836	2 March: "An act to alter the names of the township of Arcadia and the village of Bronson" is approved. From 31 March both are "known and called Kalamazoo."
1842	At Davenport, Iowa, Bronson loses his money in a land swindle. His wife Sally dies the same year.
1853	January: Bronson dies at Middlebury, Connecticut: "A Western Pioneer, Returned to Sleep with his Fathers."

1855–TODAY

The Stories Grow

1855	Schoolcraft: stones in the riverbed that look like a swimming otter.
1867	Torrey prints the race to the river at Toland's Prairie, before a pot boils away. No name, no bride.
1880	Durant: "the boiling-pot." The renaming came about "for some good reason, we presume."
1892	Verwyst: "it smokes." In 1911 Gerard calls the otters "etymological absurdities."
1922	The *Kalamazoo Gazette*: the runner is "Fleet Foot," he runs for his bride, and the year is 1810. LEGEND
1951	About this year Zoltan Sepeshy paints the race in a mural on South Burdick Street.
1986	Vogel's *Indian Names in Michigan*: no meaning proven.
Today	That the cherry tree cost Bronson his town: no record ties the two. NO RECORD

THE NAME ON PAPER: WATCH THE N GIVE WAY TO THE L

kikanamaso › Kikalemazo › Kekalamazoo › Kalamazoo › Ke-Kenamazoo › Giknamezo zibé

c. 1760, Potier · 1820, Schoolcraft · 1821, treaty · 1836, the act · 1877, "the boiling pot" · the river today

Sources for every line, with the page photographs: projectscroll.com/news/how-kalamazoo-got-its-name · Discovery and research by Michael Urbanski · Project Scroll, 2026. Dates are those of the earliest record found; "legend" marks a detail no earlier record supports.

Kikanamaso