PROJECT SCROLL RESEARCH NOTE 2026-32

The meanings of Kalamazoo in print: “a boiling pot” by 1838, and “the mirage or reflecting river” by 1874

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SUMMARY

Two meanings of “Kalamazoo” are often treated as late. The “boiling pot,” and the footrace told to explain it, are commonly traced to twentieth-century tellings. But John T. Blois’s *Gazetteer of the State of Michigan* (1838) begins its entry “Kalamazoo river, (or Kekalamazoo, [Indian,] signifying a boiling pot,)”, and at the dinner for the settlement’s twenty-fifth anniversary, on 21 June 1854, Mr. DeYoe toasted “Ke Kalamazoo — the boiling pot.” The meaning is in print before the race story (George Torrey, 1867) and before Schoolcraft’s otters (1855). The “mirage or reflecting river,” still repeated online, is not modern either: Charles R. Brown’s *The Government of Michigan*, printed at Kalamazoo in 1874, gives Kalamazoo as “An Indian name, signifying ‘the mirage or reflecting river,’” and William L. Jenks in the *Michigan Historical Collections* of 1912 attributes that meaning to W. S. George.

THE RECORD

1. **John T. Blois, *Gazetteer of the State of Michigan* (Detroit: Sydney L. Rood, 1838), p. 305**

   > *“Kalamazoo river, (or Kekalamazoo, [Indian,] signifying a boiling pot,) takes its rise in the township of Wheatland, in the county of Hillsdale”*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/gazetteerofstate00bloi)

2. ***Quarter Centennial Celebration of the Settlement of Kalamazoo, Michigan*** **(Ladies' Library Association, 1855), p. 10**

> *"By Mr. DeYoe. Ke Kalamazoo — the boiling pot, may it[s] aboriginal name be held ever sacred, and may the wholesome fires of public improvement, enterprise, intelligence and philanthropy never go out in our midst."*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/quartercentennia00ladi)

3. **Charles R. Brown,** ***The Government of Michigan*** **(Kalamazoo: Moore & Quale, 1874), p. 28**

> *"Kalamazoo (1830)—An Indian name, signifying 'the mirage or reflecting river,' applied to the stream which waters this county and parts of Calhoun and Allegan. It was originally spelled Kikalamazoo."*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/governemichigan00browrich)

4. **William L. Jenks, "History and Meaning of the County Names of Michigan,"** ***Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*** **38 (Lansing, 1912), pp. 455–456**

> *"W. S. George says the name signifies the mirage or reflecting river. Schoolcraft says it means stones seen in the water which from reflection look like otters."*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/michiganhistoric38mich)

WHAT IT CHANGES

The boiling-pot meaning is dated in print to 1838, older than the race story told to explain it; the mirage meaning to 1874, not the twentieth century.

LIMITS

Neither Blois nor Brown gives a source or a word for his meaning, and neither establishes what the name meant; Vogel (1986) rejected the mirage and treated the

boiling pot as alleged. Brown's "(1830)" is the county's year, not the meaning's.

WHAT WE SEARCHED BEFORE CALLING IT NEW

Internet Archive full-text searches for Kekalamazoo, Kikalemazo, Kikanamaso, Kikalamazoo, "boiling pot" and "reflecting river"; Vogel (1986), Romig (1973), Gannett (1905), Durant (1880), the *Compendium* (1906), the Kalamazoo Public Library's pages, Wikipedia's "Etymology of Kalamazoo" and the city's history page (October 2026).

Our standard for calling a finding new is set out in How we research (projectscroll.com/how-we-research/), and how we weigh each kind of record in Scrollsigns (projectscroll.com/scrollsigns/).

"New" means new to print as far as we can tell. If you know of an earlier publication, tell us and we will credit it here and raise the note's version.

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WORKS CITED

Earlier work, catalogues and databases named in this note, besides the records quoted above.

1. Michael Urbanski, "How Kalamazoo Got Its Name," *Project Scroll* (2026). https://projectscroll.com/news/how-kalamazoo-got-its-name/
2. Virgil J. Vogel, *Indian Names in Michigan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986). https://archive.org/search?query=vogel+indian+names+in+michigan

THE FULL STORY

The finding is set out in context, with the rest of its sources, in How Kalamazoo got its name (projectscroll.com/news/how-kalamazoo-got-its-name/). In the discoveries register:

- `boiling-pot-1838` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#boiling-pot-1838)
- `mirage-1874` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#mirage-1874)

HOW TO CITE THIS NOTE

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