PROJECT SCROLL RESEARCH NOTE 2026-40

Potato Creek, St. Joseph County, Indiana, in print: the gazetteer of 1849 and the late arrival of the “wild potato” story

Michael Urbanski ORCID 0009-0006-8183-5828 (https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8183-5828), Project Scroll · Issued 5 November 2026 · Version 1 · doi:10.5281/zenodo.23968713 (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23968713)

SUMMARY

Potato Creek runs west through Liberty Township, St. Joseph County, Indiana, to the Kankakee, and gives its name to Potato Creek State Park. The earliest printed description of the stream yet found is in E. Chamberlain’s *Indiana Gazetteer* of 1849, p. 366: “Potato Creek, a mill stream in the southern part of St. Joseph, runs west into the Kankakee.” The gazetteer of 1833 has no entry for it. The same 1849 page lists a second Potato Creek, “a mill stream in Montgomery county.” The park’s brochures explain the name by a plant with potato-like roots gathered along the creek. That explanation was not found in the nineteenth-century gazetteers, county histories or place-name books searched, nor in the park guidebooks of 1984–2000. Its earliest form yet found is a Purdue University Calumet student newspaper of 31 January 2005, which says the park “is named after potato-like roots.” The only nineteenth-century Indiana story of a creek named for wild potatoes belongs to the other stream: the 1881 history of Montgomery County says its Potato Creek and prairie “took their name from the wild potatoes that then grew so luxuriantly in this slough.”

THE RECORD

1. **E. Chamberlain, *The Indiana Gazetteer* (Indianapolis, 1849), p. 366**

   > *"Potato Creek, a mill stream in Montgomery county. | Potato Creek, a mill stream in the southern part of St. Joseph, runs west into the Kankakee."*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/indianagazetteer00cham)

2. ***History of Montgomery County, Indiana* (Chicago: H. H. Hill & N. Iddings, 1881), p. 562**

   > *"The prairie and creek both took their name from the wild potatoes that then grew so luxuriantly in this slough."*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/cu31924028803307)

3. **Amy Pilarczyk, "Getaway to Potato Creek," *The Chronicle* (Purdue University Calumet), 31 January 2005**

   > *"Potato Creek opened in 1977 and is named after potato-like roots grown around the six square mile park."*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/chronicle23unse_15)

WHAT IT CHANGES

No published account dates the creek's name in print or tests the park's explanation of it. The earliest description yet found is moved to 1849. The 1833 gazetteer is shown to lack the creek, and the 1849 page is shown to carry two Potato Creeks. The park's explanation is first attested, in the sources yet found, in 2005. The one nineteenth-century wild-potato story in Indiana belongs to the Montgomery County creek, from which the explanation may have been borrowed.

LIMITS

"Earliest" means earliest yet found in the sources searched. The absence of the explanation from older print does not show it was never told. Chapman (1880) records the ground-nut and a wild potato-vine growing in the county, so the explanation remains botanically reasonable. A Miami-Illinois reconstruction, "red-potato creek," published by Bright (2004) from McCafferty, is a scholar's reconstruction, not a recorded name.

WHAT WE SEARCHED BEFORE CALLING IT NEW

Scott's *Indiana Gazetteer* (1833); Chamberlain (1849); the gazetteer of 1858; Chapman (1880); Howard (1907); the 1875 atlas; Baker and Carmony, *Indiana Place Names* (1975); Dunn on Indiana geographical names; Bright (2004); McCaig (1988) and five later guidebooks; the DNR brochures; Chronicling America; about thirty full-text queries at the Internet Archive.

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.

WORKS CITED

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

1. Michael Urbanski, "Before the lake at Potato Creek," *Project Scroll* (2026), Part 1 of the series on Potato Creek. https://projectscroll.com/news/before-the-lake-at-potato-creek/

2. William Bright, *Native American Placenames of the United States* (Norman, 2004), “Potato.” https://archive.org/details/nativeamericanpl0000brig

---

THE FULL STORY

The finding is set out in context, with the rest of its sources, in Before the lake: the farms of Potato Creek (projectscroll.com/news/before-the-lake-at-potato-creek/). In the discoveries register:

- `pc-gazetteer-1849` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#pc-gazetteer-1849)
- `pc-name-explanation` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#pc-name-explanation)

HOW TO CITE THIS NOTE

Michael Urbanski, “Potato Creek, St. Joseph County, Indiana, in print: the gazetteer of 1849 and the late arrival of the ‘wild potato’ story,” Project Scroll Research Note 2026-40, version 1 (5 November 2026), https://projectscroll.com/discoveries/notes/2026-40/. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23968713.

BibTeX

```
@techreport{urbanski202640,
  author      = {Urbanski, Michael},
  orcid       = {0009-0006-8183-5828},
  title       = {{Potato Creek, St. Joseph County, Indiana, in print:
the gazetteer of 1849 and the late arrival of the ``wild potato''
story}},
  institution = {Project Scroll},
  type        = {Project Scroll Research Note},
  number      = {2026-40},
  year        = {2026},
  month       = {nov},
  url         = {https://projectscroll.com/discoveries/notes/2026-40/},
  doi         = {10.5281/zenodo.23968713},
  note        = {Version 1}
}
```