

BEAUTY STRIPPED

How the nomenclature of Yosemite National Park fails cultural heritage

Yosemite National Park has always been a beautiful place, and that beauty inspired the culture, language, and place names assigned by the Awahnichi tribe who was indigenous to the Yosemite Valley. Currently, the Yosemite Valley maintains none of the place names held by the Awahnichi tribe. The written record of the region begins with what white folks referred to as the Valley's "discovery", and what would now be called the mass imprisonment, displacement, and murder of an ethnic group. This record is provided here alongside the white names for some of the Valley's most famous features. Unfortunately, records of the tribe's culture and language are less thorough than records of their extermination. Consequently, the Awahnichi words featured on this map are taken from the journals of the members of the Mariposa Battalion.

The diaries are written by James A. Hutchings and Lafayette H. Bunnell, two members of the Mariposa Battalion, the militia which "discovered" the Yosemite Valley. The selected text corresponds to the portion of the journals that describe the renaming of or initial contact with each of these now iconic features. Through these writings, it is clear that the dominant narrative of white culture quickly took control of how we know what is now called Yosemite. These texts reflect a white superiority complex and at times demonstrate how English lacks the ability to communicate the sublime as thoroughly as the language of the Awahnichi tribe.

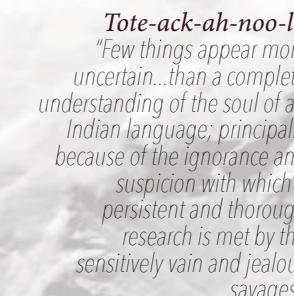
The Yosemite Valley now sees an average of 4.1 million visitors each summer and offers programming based on natural features as well as cultural features. Programming based off of natural features includes hiking trails, rafting, and climbing guides. On the otherhand, the cultural programs in Yosemite are made up of a collection of museums and shops. Of these cultural features, the park service is currently showing 17 educational exhibits, one of which is focused on Native history. The exhibit focusing on Native culture describes the history of basket weaving spanning from 1929-1980, well after the true time period that the Ahwahnichi occupied the Valley. Moreover, the exhibits focusing on the history of the Valley begin in the 19th century, glossing over the history of the Ahwahnichi.



Tu-tok-a-nu-la
"Leaning Tower,... has on its top a number of projecting rocks that very much resemble cannon."



Poo-see-na-chuck-ka
"Cathedral Spires' are the two closely set symmetrical columns in the large recess just east of Cathedral Rocks. They appear like the towers of a Gothic Cathedral!"



Tote-ack-ah-noo-la
"Few things appear more uncertain...than a complete understanding of the soul of an Indian language; principally because of the ignorance and suspicion with which a persistent and thorough research is met by the sensitively vain and jealous savages."



Kom-po-pai-zes
"Three of the captives were known to us, being sons of Ten-ie-ya, one of whom was afterwards killed...from the strange coincidence of three brothers being made prisoners so near them, we designated the peaks as the Three Brothers."



Patill-ima
"Glacier Point's naming is unknown... Some writers claim that it was named by members of the Mariposa Battalion. However, this does not seem likely because it is doubtful that any of the men in that group knew enough about glaciers and their action to have recognized the significance of such a name."



"The name given to the rocks now known as 'The Royal Arches' is...Scho-ko-ni, meaning the movable shade to a cradle, which, when in position, formed an arched shade over the infant's head. The name of 'The Royal Arch' was given to it by a comrade who was a member of the Masonic Fraternity, and it has since been called 'The Royal Arches.'"



Wai-ack
"One of the children, a boy five or six years old, was discovered naked, climbing up a smooth granite slope...He was a bright boy, and Capt. Boling adopted him, calling him Reub... To illustrate the folly, as a general thing, of trying to civilize his race, he ran away."



Yan-o-pah
"The signification is certainly poetical, and is but one step removed from the sublime. One objection only can be raised against it; it is a little too romantic."



1 in = 1 mile
North

Map by: Regan Murray

Projection: North America Albers Equal Area Conic
Data sourced from the journals of James A. Hutchings and Lafayette H. Bunnell and the California Geoportal.