

THE AUTHORIAL MYSTERY OF *ESOX MASQUINONGY*



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In the Winter 2019 issue of *American Currents*, I analyzed the generic name *Morone*, proposed by American naturalist-physician Samuel L. Mitchill in 1814. Now I take a look at another Mitchill name, that of the Muskellunge, or Muskie—*Esox masquinongy*—the largest member of the pike family Esocidae.

Unlike *Morone*, there is little mystery about the meaning of “*masquinongy*.” It is almost certainly derived from the Native American (Ojibwe, or Chippewa) name for this species, a combination of *mask*, meaning ugly, and *kinongé*, meaning fish. But the name is now mired in something of a muddle. In 2015, new information came to light that questions whether Mitchill is the technically acceptable author of the name.

Mitchill is said to have proposed the name in 1824, back when new-species descriptions in America sometimes appeared in daily newspapers. Trouble is, very few people saw the description that he published. Instead, taxonomists from David Starr Jordan to the present relied on a citation to Mitchill’s article that appeared in James E. DeKay’s 1840 monograph, *Zoology of New-York*. That citation read: “E. Masquinongy. Mitchell, *Mirror* 1824, p, 297.” (Note that DeKay misspelled Mitchill’s name.)

Based on DeKay’s citation, Jordan and others assumed Mitchill’s description appeared in the *New York Mirror*, a weekly newspaper published in New York City from 1823 to 1842. Jordan searched for the article but could not find it. Yet he nevertheless treated the name as valid with Mitchill as author, a decision accepted without question by every fish taxonomist ever since.

In 2015, German ichthyologist Ronald Fricke, while tracking down fugitive references for the online Catalog of Fishes, finally found Mitchill’s article. It was not in the *New York Mirror* per se, but in a supplement to it called *Minerva*, an important bibliographic distinction DeKay failed to mention.

With Mitchill’s description in hand, Fricke made a surprising discovery: Mitchill did not propose the name “*Esox masquinongy*,”

at least not in proper binomial (genus/species) form. Instead, he simply called the fish “Masquinongy of the Great Lakes.” Nor did Mitchill indicate a genus, saying only that the fish was an “*esox*” (with a lowercase “e”) or a “pike.” It appears that DeKay created the impression that Mitchill formed a binomial when he cited the species as “E. Masquinongy. Mitchell” in 1840.

So, then, who is the author of *Esox masquinongy*? Or, in other words, what is the first available taxonomic usage of the name? The earliest I’ve found is Jordan’s *Catalogue of the Fishes Known to Inhabit the Waters of North America*, published in 1885. If this is correct, then authorship of *Esox masquinongy* should be Jordan 1885. Or Jordan (ex Mitchill) 1885. Or maybe even Mitchill in Jordan 1885.

Or maybe things should just stay as they are? Since “*Esox masquinongy* Mitchill 1824” is such a well-entrenched name/author combination in both scientific and popular literature, perhaps the notion of “prevailing usage” should apply.

Whatever your opinion, this name teaches us the value of accurate bibliographic data, and the importance of relying on primary rather than secondary sources.

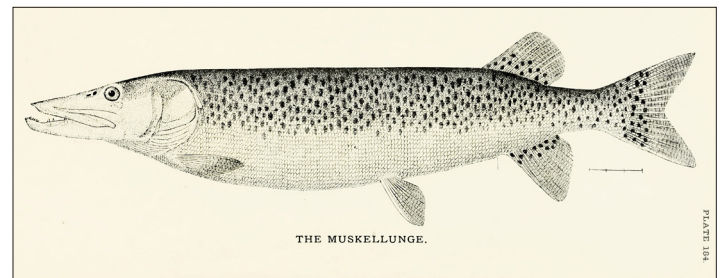


Illustration by H.L. Todd from *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States* (1884).

CORRIGENDUM TO “THE MYSTERY OF MORONE: SOLVED AT LAST?”

In the Winter 2019 *American Currents* I wrote that Samuel Mitchill’s 1814 pamphlet on the fishes of New York “represents the first American fishes described by an American.” Perhaps I should have said “native-born American.” In 1811, ornithologist Alexander Wilson described and named the American Shad *Alosa sapidissima* and the Alewife *A. pseudoharengus* in the American edition of Rees’ *Cyclopaedia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*. He was an associate editor of Rees’ *Cyclopaedia* while working on his nine-volume *American Ornithology* (1808–1814). Born in Scotland in 1766, he emigrated to America in 1794, and he died in Philadelphia in 1813.

Reprinted and revised from The ETYfish Project, the Fish Name Etymology Database. Search 33,000 (and counting) names at <http://www.etyfish.org>.

Christopher Scharpf was editor of *American Currents* from 1996–2008, has served on NANFA’s Board of Directors and as Membership Coordinator, and was named a NANFA Fellow in 2004. He met his future wife Stephanie at the NANFA Convention in Chattanooga in 1998. Since 2009, Chris has been working on The ETYFish Project, the first and only reference explaining the derivations and meanings of the generic and specific names of all the fishes of the world. He hopes to wrap things up in 2021.