

# States and their names

by Bill O'Brian

Most Americans know that the city of Washington was named for our first president, George Washington. Fewer know that Virginia was named for the "virgin queen," Elizabeth I of England; that Maryland was named for Queen Henrietta Maria, the wife of King Charles I of England; and that the District of Columbia was named, indirectly, for Christopher Columbus. And fewer still could tell you that at least 25 of the 50 states trace their names to Native American words, ideas or places.

Because good records were not always kept, and because languages change over time, it is not always easy to know for sure how a place got its name. But historians generally agree that the state names listed here probably came from American Indian words or ideas.

## States with Native American names



*Alabama*: from a Choctaw Indian word meaning "thicket-clearer" or "plant-gatherer."



*Alaska*: an Aleutian word meaning "mainland" or "that which the sea breaks against."



*Arizona*: "little spring" in the Pima, Papago or O'odham language.



*Arkansas*: from a Sioux word meaning "downstream people" or "south wind."



*Connecticut*: from a Mohawk or Algonquin term meaning "at the long tidal river."



*Illinois*: likely meanings include "warriors" and "tribe of superior men."



*Indiana*: Latinized form of "land of the Indians."



*Iowa*: likely meanings include "the sleepy ones" and "the beautiful land."



*Kansas*: from a Sioux word for "people of the south wind."



*Kentucky*: likely meanings include "meadow land" and "land of tomorrow."



*Massachusetts*: from an Algonquin term for "at the great hill."



*Michigan*: from an Ottawa or Chippewa word for "large lake."



*Minnesota*: from a Dakota (Sioux) term for "water reflecting cloudy skies" or "sky-tinted water."



*Mississippi*: "great water" or "father of waters" in various Indian languages.



*Missouri*: likely meanings include "muddy water" and "of the big canoe."



*Nebraska*: likely meanings include "flat water" and "broad river."



*New Mexico*: indirectly from the name Mextli, Aztec god of war and storms.



*North Dakota*: named for the Dakota (Sioux) Indians; Dakota means "friend."



*Ohio*: from an Iroquois word for "beautiful river" or "large creek."



*Oklahoma*: from a Choctaw term for "red people."



*South Dakota*: see North Dakota.



*Tennessee*: named for a Cherokee village, Tanasi; meaning is unknown.



*Texas*: from a Caddo word for "friends."



*Utah*: from a Navajo word to describe the Ute tribe, meaning "higher up."



*Wyoming*: from a Delaware Indian term for "large meadow" or an Algonquin term for "large prairie place." Originally for the Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania, the name was transplanted west by settlers.

*Note*: Some researchers also think that *Hawaii*, *Idaho*, and *Wisconsin* also come from Native American words, but they are not certain about that.