



RIV. MATTAWISHKWIA RIV.

PREMIÈRES NATIONS | FIRST NATIONS



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Mattawishkwia - River

Mattawishkwia. The name of this river, which runs alongside and through the town of Hearst, is of Aboriginal origin and means, according to the official interpretation established by municipal By-law No. 20-02, "Bends in the Mouth of the River".¹ Other sources sometimes suggest "shallow waters" or "Town of the River"² as possible interpretations.

While the Mattawishkwia River today serves as a source of drinking water and recreation for Hearst residents who fish, kayak or polar dip at carnival time, the river and its water system have special meaning for First Nations. In addition to the sacred character of the waterways, the rivers have, for a long time, served as roads and streets to access Northern

¹ Town of Hearst municipal archives, *By-Law No. 20-02*, March 12, 2002

² *Ibid.*

Ontario, its communities, hunting and trapping territories and, with European colonization, the fur trading posts of the Hudson's Bay Company or the Révillon Frères Company.

The Mattawishkwia River watershed flows through the traditional lands of the Cree and Ojibwe peoples, signatories to Treaty 9. This agreement was negotiated in 1905, not with the First Nations concerned, but rather between Ottawa and Ontario, with the objective of freeing Northern Ontario from Aboriginal use rights³ and opening the territory to settlement, railway construction, and natural resource development. The Aboriginal nations, who were unwillingly subjected to this agreement, lost out: a negligible annual income, a genocidal school system (residential schools), reserves poorly located for long-term needs, and hunting, fishing and trapping rights that were often contested.⁴

It is in this context that surveyors and cartographers, arriving at the turn of the twentieth century, present the first written

³ The Royal Proclamation of 1763 was a British colonial act that redefined the boundaries of British North America after the conquest of New France by creating, among other things, a territory reserved for the use of Aboriginal nations on lands not occupied by the French and English. By recognizing the usufructuary rights of the Aboriginal nations over these lands, the British Crown asserted its sovereignty over the territory while establishing a formal process for the cession of Aboriginal territorial rights. This process, which is still in effect today, involves the negotiation of nation-to-nation treaties or land claim agreements. For more information: Anthony J. Hall, "Royal Proclamation of 1763" The Canadian Encyclopedia, August 30, 2019, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/royal-proclamation-of-1763>.

⁴ For more information on Treaty 9, consult the following resources: John F. Leslie, "Treaty 9", The Canadian Encyclopedia, November 10, 2020, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/treaty-9>.

records of the river's native name. The phonetic transcription of the name varies from one source to another: Matta-wish-guai-a, Mattawishguia, Mattawishquia, Mattawishkwia.

Surveyor and historian Ernie Bies makes an interesting reading of the 1911 Hearst Townsite Plan. According to his analysis, the Hearst subdivision was first briefly named Mattawishguia. He notes, among other things, the strike-through of the word ~~Mattawishguia~~ Townsite and the superimposed inscription of "Hearst", presumably from 1912 onwards to emphasize the role of William Howard Hearst, then Minister of the Ontario Department of Forests, Lands, and Mines.

This Euro-Canadian tradition of renaming geographical landmarks to commemorate the great men (and with rare exceptions the great women) of history will not escape the Town of Hearst's subdivision. Many streets were named after royalty and politicians of the day, as well as clergy, pioneers, doctors, and local entrepreneurs. Mattawishkwia, however, has resisted tradition and like other lakes and rivers - Kabinakagami, Minnipuka, Missinaibi, Nagagamisis, Pivabiska, Shekak - is a reminder of the millennia-old aboriginal presence in the region.⁵

⁵ Ernie Bies, *July 1914–Hearst Wiped out by Fire*, 2014, p. 6. <https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~cdobie/history/bies-hearst-fire.pdf>

