Black Meadow Ridge - Thoughts on a Place Name

This June Jenny Nygard sent this letter to Chris Dreps of the Eno River Association. She has edited it for the Association to share. The letter has supporting documentation, which for want of space is not included here, with the exception of the "1985 Eno River Calendar" page about the woodland buffalo. It is likely they played a major part in the story of "The Black Meadows."

This letter is in response to your inquiry last week about continuing to use the name "Black Meadow Ridge." Thanks for asking Kerstin and me for input. We trust you will share it with others, in particular those concerned with Eno history and interpretation. Some quotes are underlined or italicized for emphasis.

The place name Black Meadow Ridge is historically important to the site. "The Story of West Point" was first written in 1972 as the historical section of the Environmental Impact Statement which saved West Point on the Eno. Ten historians led by Mary Claire Engstrom, then Hillsborough's official historian, contributed by researching the site. Hugh Conway Browning, a celebrated historian, was a major participant. The opening paragraph of "The Story of West Point" written by Jean Anderson (with input from Margaret Nygard) begins with the streams:

> "As the Eno River runs between present day Guess and Roxboro Roads, it passes by a succession of islands and over two major falls. By Roxboro Road a pair of companion streams enter the river on the south bank which are known as Black Meadow Branch and White Meadow Branch. These streams and others in the vicinity are fed by 15 springs. One deed dated 1794 gives directions *'to cross the meadows to a stake above the meadow spring.'* From early deeds like this one, there is evidence that the meadows which gave the Meadow Branches their name were in existence in an extensive way before the white man came to settle. And there is further evidence from local people that these meadows were once occupied by a big Indian settlement. Here, as a youngster, Mr. Wm. Pratt, Consulting Engineer for the City of Durham, would pick up *'bushel baskets'* of arrowheads and axeheads after a fresh plowing."

Meadowland and cleared land was rare in colonial times in North Carolina. Jean Anderson discusses that fact in her book, Durham County on pages 46-47 quoting William Few, a signer of the US Constitution,

> "My father … purchased land on the banks of the river Eno, in the county of Orange. Those lands were in their natural state. Not a tree had been cut. The

country was thinly inhabited, and the state of society was in the first stage of civilization."

Jean goes on to explain, "Animal herds were usually small by necessity; comparatively little cleared land was available for pasture in the early days." She adds a footnote to a book referencing how thickly wooded a frontier this region once was.

The names Black Meadow Branch and White Meadow Branch were in use by locals in Margaret Nygard's and Jean Anderson's time. "The Story of West Point" was written more than half a century ago. Today's Eno staff may be cognizant of the fact there were *far, far* fewer people here in the 1960's and 1970's; old memories were fresher and more abundant. Those who had families with generational histories on the river were available to impart valuable firsthand information to Eno historians such as Margaret, Jean, and Mary Claire Engstrom. Many of them were people who were living or had lived "close to the land," for whom change came slower than it does now, and who still held old customs, tales, and place names that were bound to geographic location. Today we are in a fast-moving, vastly different world, where the topography and sense of place can be erased in an instant.

As historians central to the Eno effort both Margaret and Jean in middle and later age interviewed and gathered oral history from many elders who long their preceded their own generation. These accounts are taped at the Southern Historical Collection, are in Jean's and Mother's papers, in Jean's published writing, and in some 23 Eno River Calendars, as well as the Eno Journals Margaret edited and wrote. Mary Claire Engstrom also was the author of an important Eno Journal on the Eno's Quakers.

I personally knew Jack Vaughan and his sisters and collected information from them in the 1970's when I ran the Volunteer Guide Program at the new park. Mother and I had an abiding fondness for the Vaughans that was mutual. Their generation went back long before Mother's into the early 1900's. They were very close to their uncle Hugh Magnum, the now famous photographer. They grew up at West Point in his company. They told me that he considered himself an artist, and that he often wondered what would become of his work. They were actively involved in saving the site as a living history museum and, with Mangum's daughter Julia Rowe (and his grandson Eddie Rowe), they acted to preserve Mangum's glass negatives at Duke. White Meadow Branch and Black Meadow Branch, were stream names Polly, Louise, Vivian, and Jack grew up using, names passed down through generations.

As Jean states in the Environmental Impact Statement historical section, “The Story of West Point,” "the meadows which gave the Meadow Branches their name were in existence in an extensive way before the white man came to settle.” She goes on to say,

> “Nothing now remains of these meadows except those in the 16 acres behind the mill at Roxboro Road. A housing development has obliterated them in the south; Old Farm has bulldozed them in the east and converted White Meadow Branch into a culvert. But back in the 1740’s when the first settlers came down the Indian Trading Path from Virginia, the happy combination here of wide meadows, many springs, the river, several islands, and the fine ford made this an excellent place to settle down on, grow corn, build mills, and earn a livelihood.”

Margaret Nygard wrote a presentation in 1987, ”The Flower of Carolina. A Short Story about the Settlement and Protection of the Eno River Valley.” She refers to the “Black Meadows” in the context of describing the Native American presence on the Eno.

> “The native Americans, always few in number, have now been almost entirely displaced. Achonechy Town has been replaced by Hillsborough. Its 12 to 15 houses, home to 100 or so residents, its small burial grounds and adjacent corn and bean fields, were covered over in the 1760’s by Hillsborough’s colonial race track. Adshusheer Town, downstream, located possibly off Durham’s Fishdam Road near the Black Meadows, has gone under the condominiums and small housing of Greater Durham."

She goes on to describe how just beyond Shoemaker's Ford by West Point Mill there is a major geological shift and abrupt change in the natural landscape.

> “The flavor of the country through which the Eno moves is of the mountains and many of the shrubs and flowers are mountain plants. But at the fast moving city of Durham there is a change. At West Point precisely, the Eno enters the Triassic basin and later at Penny’s bend it is crossed under by a diabase sill. With these changes in geology there are dramatic changes in scenery and botany.”

This information comes to us from geologist Duncan Heron, long an Eno Association warrior, who served as Association president multiple times. Former Chair of the Duke Geology Department, Duncan documented much of the Eno's geology, and

he actively participated in producing the Environmental Impact Statement that saved West Point.

The big geologic shift at West Point may explain the contrasting names given to the companion streams on the south bank of the Eno. One must imagine the vast expanse of meadowland that was there in pre-colonial and colonial times, unusual in an otherwise wooded region. In the absence of buildings, roads, or forest, the difference in the topography and the appearance of the open meadows would have been evident to the eye. The meadowland, itself, would have displayed that geologic change.

The natural ford near West Point Mill made it possible to wade across the river in Native American times and in early gristmill days. Today's Roxboro Road is in the same approximate location. Both road and ford mark that geologic shift. Downstream of the ford (where Old Farm now sits) was the sloped meadowland containing White Meadow Branch. Upstream of the ford was a much steeper ridge of meadowland containing Black Meadow Branch, which still runs to the mill. One side of the southbank, upriver of the ford, was cast in more shadow by the steep bank of the ridge. The other side of the southbank, downstream of the ford, was more gradual terrain that lay in more sun. It was a time when night sky was truly dark, and the stars must have been dazzling. In strong moonlight without color the visual difference between one side and the other may have been yet more striking, one darker, one lighter.

The old names "Black Meadow Branch" and "White Meadow Branch" are akin to "Yin and Yang." They suggest contrast between two parts of a whole. Regardless of the geologic shift, when the Eno Indians and related tribes farmed these meadows, they would have had a practical need to identify location or destination when traversing the big open space. The two streams provided water to grow the Indian corn, which once was the Eno Indians' primary activity. It would have been necessary for the streams and the land containing them to have specific names; the use of different, ideally opposite, names within that common ground would have made communication clear.

The English names long in use for the paired streams were "Black Meadow Branch" and "White Meadow Branch." Logically there once was a corresponding "Black Meadow" and a "White Meadow." It is a tantalizing possibility that the Eno Indian words for "black" and "white," perhaps Siouan language, may have preceded those English names. How fortunate it is that the Eno, itself, still bears its Indian name.

To move even further back in time, the meadowland at West Point was not solely cleared by Native Americans. Herds of woodland buffalo once roamed the thick forests of our region. The Sennett Hole, the Eno's biggest watering hole, and the ford at West

Point would have drawn the buffalo en-mass. A natural behavior throughout the world, buffalo herds wallow where they gather, and, in doing so, transform forest into meadow. It is thought that buffalo herds rolled and pummeled the woods on the Eno's south bank into open meadowland. which became ideal agricultural land. The Old Buffalo Trail, a deep passage leading to the Sennett Hole at West Point, is a remnant of their presence. By 1765 they had vanished from North Carolina.

In recent years Josie McNeil and Dave Owen tried to save the entire ridge above the core West Point site and advocated adding it and the whole site to the State Park system. The name Black Meadow Ridge was used to refer to the site, by adding "Ridge" to "Black Meadow." The name was consequently used by the Save Black Meadow Ridge group to identify and try to protect the entire site from imminent development.

"Black Meadow" is language in historic usage for the location on the southbank containing West Point Mill, the McCown-Mangum House, and the surrounding woodland. The name is historically fitting and accurate. It predates the name "West Point." The name contains the history, the true story of the place. The name conveys the pre-colonial presence of the buffalo and the presence of the Eno Indians and associated tribes, who once grew corn on the meadowland. The name conveys the corn-based, water-powered gristmill economy that West Point Mill exemplifies as a living history museum. Furthermore, the stream Black Meadow Branch is part of the mill race powering the mill, was used by Hugh Mangum to wash his glass negatives, and was his photographic subject.

To call Black Meadow Ridge otherwise would be to erase history and not be in keeping with the Eno mission statement to preserve the river's history.
The development name "Eno Village" is a modern conceit, an affront to the very river it will damage. We fought with you to save the whole of the ridge. It was a valiant effort, albeit a partial success, that should always be honored by using the place name from that struggle. The name "Black Meadow Ridge" carries history, meaning, and mystery.

Yours truly,
Jenny

Attachments:

First 2 pages of "The Story of West Point" (typed by Jenny Nygard in 1978, edited in its last form by both Jean Anderson and Margaret Nygard)

Pages 46 and 47, from the book Durham County written by Jean Bradley Anderson, Duke University Press, 1990

Biography and photo of Jack Vaughan from the "1988 Eno River Calendar" written by Margaret Nygard

Photo likely made by Hugh Mangum of his daughter Julia with her cousins, the Vaughans

Cover page and first 2 pages of "The Flower of Carolina. A Short Story about the Settlement and Protection of the Eno River Valley" ~ written and delivered by Margaret Nygard in 1987

3 letters describing the work to gather and present the history of West Point at an urgent time, dated 9/24/1971, 9/30/1971, and 2/14/1972

Opening page and narrative from the "1985 Eno River Calendar," written by Margaret Nygard, illustrated and designed by Jenny Nygard, photo by Caroline Gross



BUFFALO, *Bison bison bison*, and **ELK**, *Cervus canadensis canadensis*.

This young buffalo, encountered in what is now Person County, N.C., was promptly killed for supper, and William Byrd took the hair of his tail home to his neighbor, Mrs. Mumford, who spun it into stockings durable enough to serve "an Israelite during his forty Year's march thro' the Wilderness." Woodland forms of Buffalo and Elk once ranged the mountains and the northwest piedmont in small, scattered herds. They seem to have been scarce even in Lawson's time. Moseley's claim that "This country abounds with Elk and Buffalo" was dubious. Hunting, stimulated by the Great Indian Trading Path, finally eliminated both species from N.C., even before European intrusion, perhaps. While Buffalo were seen occasionally between 1720 and 1750, they were totally gone by 1765. They are believed to be the first animal known to be extirpated by man in North Carolina. Elk, however seem to have died out even earlier, perhaps by 1700. Remnants of the Buffalo's statewide existence persist in place names. 40 are listed in the *N.C. Gazateer*. There is a Buffalo Creek in Northern Orange County. At Stinking Creek in nearby Alamance a Buffalo massacre is said to have taken place. Some say that our earliest roads, deeply carved with curved banks, were Buffalo trails."

~ Margaret Nygard for the "**Eno River Calendar for 1985 ~ A Bestiary in Celebration of America's 400th Anniversary**" Illustration & design by Jenny Nygard. Simpson Paper Company gave a design award for this calendar.