
Selected English Place Names with Indigenous Origins in Western Oregon

This list provides a few examples of modern English place names that have their roots in Indigenous languages of western Oregon. Many speakers of these languages were forcibly removed to reservations beginning in the mid-1850s, including the Coast (Siletz) Reservation, while others managed to remain in their homelands. Today, their descendants are members of several different Tribes, including the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians (CTSI). Even though the modern Siletz Reservation may be far away from some of these places, many Siletz Tribal families still remember them and have worked through the generations to remain connected to their ancestral homelands.

English speakers have incorporated Indigenous terms into English in different ways. Sometimes, they attempt to adapt an Indigenous place name directly. Other times, they have adopted other Native words for English place names, for example naming places after individual Native people or the names of Tribal groups. Because English lacks many of the sounds typical of Indigenous languages, the pronunciation of Indigenous words in English is often very different from the original. For comparison, this list includes the spellings of original Indigenous words, when possible, using the most modern alphabet used by learners and speakers of these languages today.

Alsea Language and Homelands.¹ Alsea and Yaquina are Indigenous Tribes from the central Oregon Coast. The term “Alsea” is derived from the word *alsíya*, a word that neighboring Tribes used as the name of the people, but to Alsea people themselves it was the name of their river valley that was their homeland. Much of that homeland encompassed large parts of what would eventually be designated the Coast (Siletz) Reservation in the mid-1850s. Although the Alsea people were not forcibly removed in the 1850s, the seizures of Coast (Siletz) Reservation land in 1865 and 1875 included the areas that were their traditional homelands, forcing the surviving families to consolidate on the remaining reservation lands headquartered at Siletz. The language of Alsea people is often divided into two categories: Alsea and Yaquina.

- *Yaquina (Yaqona)* – In Alsea and Yaquina languages, Yaqona is the name for the river valley of the Yaquina people. Early Euro-American travelers picked up this Indigenous term with slight changes (Lewis & Clark wrote *Youikeones* and *Youkone* for example)² and the term passed easily into English as the name of the people (Yaquina Indians), Yaquina River, Yaquina Bay, and Yaquina Head.

¹ Bright, W. (2004). *Native American placenames of the United States* (p. 34). University of Oklahoma Press. <https://books.google.com/books?id=5XfxzCm1qa4C&pg=PA34>

² McArthur, L. A., & McArthur, L. L. (1952). *Oregon geographic names*. Oregon Historical Society Press.

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- *Yachats*³ (*Ya'xaik*) – The modern coastal town of Yachats retains a version of the original name of the Alsea village that stood there since time immemorial. Alsea people call this village Ya'xaik. Oral tradition suggests that the village was hit especially hard in the early 1800s by some of the first epidemic diseases that came through western Oregon, leaving behind a graveyard where a major village had been. In 1859, the U.S. government chose the site as a southern headquarters for the Coast (Siletz) Reservation to oversee the Alsea and began forcibly removing Siuslaw, Lower Umpqua, Hanis, and Miluk peoples to this Alsea subagency. A generation of Coos and Lower Umpqua people struggled to survive in the area before it was opened to settlers in 1876. The Coos pronunciation of the village name, Yahach, became the basis for the version of the word that English speakers use today.

Siuslaw-Quuiich Language and Homelands.⁴ Siuslaw people (*Sha-yuush-tl'a* to speakers of the language) share a close relationship with Lower Umpqua (*Quu-iich*) peoples, with both speaking variations of the same language. These two peoples lived in a string of villages along those two beloved rivers and along the coast between Tsii-maa (Tenmile Creek south of Yachats) and Ske-ich (Tenmile Creek in modern Coos County). The way settlers documented these place names during their encounters with Siuslaw-speaking peoples varied widely—providing a good example of the chaotic way Indigenous words come into English. Members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, who came through the area in 1805–06, spoke with people from Tribes to the north and took down the spelling Shiatuckle and Killawats. By 1828, Alexander McLeod, of the Hudson's Bay Company, picked the spelling Saoustla. In the early 1840s the U.S. Exploring Expedition favored the spelling Saiustla. Much later, professional linguists began to record words and stories from elders in western Oregon who spoke their Indigenous languages, including a Siletz elder named Louisa Smith, who was both Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw, as well as her son Spencer Scott.⁵ Some descendants of Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw peoples are part of CTSI today while others are part of the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indians (CTCLUSI). The language program at CTCLUSI has invested greatly in revitalizing and teaching the *Sha-yuu-sh-tl'a* language.

- *Siuslaw National Forest* (*Sha-yuush-tl'a*) – In 1908, the Tillamook and Umpqua forests were merged by the U.S. government to create the Siuslaw National Forest, named after the centrally located Siuslaw

³ View the Future Foundation. (2010). *The Yaxaik Native people, origins of the Yachats name, and the prison camp years*. https://www.viewthefuture.org/files/ugd/3f1f33_26d78e0d8b01405d97d4534e1044f8b8.pdf

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. (2008). *What's in a name: Siuslaw*. https://www.fs.usda.gov/detailfull/siuslaw/learning/history-culture/?cid=fsbdev7_007330; Macnaughtan, D. (2020). *Siuslaw and Kuitsh: Native Americans of the Oregon coast*. Lane Library. <https://libraryguides.lanec.edu/siuslaw>

⁵ Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. (n.d.). *Tlma'-qt Chiitl, Louisa Smith*. https://ctsi.nsn.us/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Lousia-Smith_Biography.pdf

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River that flows from the Coast Range to the Pacific Ocean. The names Tillamook, Umpqua, and Siuslaw all originate from the names of Indigenous Tribes. Contrary to popular belief that “Siuslaw” means “far away waters,” linguist Patty Whereat, a member of CTCLUSI, has clarified that Siuslaw refers to a minor stream near a significant winter village that joins the North Fork of the Siuslaw River.

- *Woahink (Wa-xi-niik), Siltcoos (Ch'ilh-kuus), and Tahkenitch (Tsa-xen-iich) Lakes* – The English names of these three large lakes, which are located just inland from the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area, are all derived from their original Siuslaw/Quuiich names: Wa-xi-niik, Ch'ilh-kuus, and Tsa-xen-iich.

Coos Language and Homelands. Coos refers to two related languages, Hanis and Miluk, spoken in the area centered on Coos Bay. Linguists classify both languages as “Penutian”, which is related to both Siuslaw and Alsea languages, spoken by Tribes to the north, and to Kalapuyan and Takelma languages, spoken by Tribes further inland. Although Hanis and Miluk people each occupied many villages across much of today’s Coos County, the peoples and languages take their name from some of the biggest villages at the center of their respective homelands: Hanis for Hanisiich near the present-day town of Empire, and Miluk for Milukwich near the town of Charleston. The many crises Indigenous people faced during the settlement and termination eras led to multiple relocations, so that today there are Coos people who are a part of CTSI, CTCLUSI, and the Coquille Indian Tribe. All of these Tribes are dedicated to the revitalization of their Indigenous languages, with CTCLUSI primarily focusing on the Hanis language and CTCLUSI and the Coquille Indian Tribe both focusing on Miluk.

- *Coos Bay, Coos River, Coos County (kuukwis)* – In both Hanis and Miluk languages the name for the region around Coos Bay is kuu-kwis. This name has been used in English since 1806, when Lewis and Clark asked Clatsop and Tillamook people near where they stayed in Astoria about the peoples to the south along the coast. They recorded the term Cook-koo-oose in their journals. Variations like “Koos” and “Cahoose” were used by later writers, but over time the most common spelling became Coos, as we know it in English today.
- *Willanch Slough (wu'lench)* – On the east side of Coos Bay near the small town of Cooston, Willanch slough drains into the main bay. Its English name draws directly from its original Hanis.

Dee-ni' (Athabaskan) People and Homelands. Athabaskan is a large language family that includes languages from the American Southwest (including Navajo and Apache), California (including Hupa and Wailaki), and even Alaska and Canada (including Ahtna and Gwich'in). The Athabaskan language spoken on the southern Oregon and northern California coasts is known by several different names (including Siletz Dee-ni', Dee-ni' Wee-ya', and Oregon Athabaskan) while commonly referred to as Nuu-wee-ya' (“our

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words”) in the language itself. People speaking Nuu-wee-ya’ come from a series of closely related villages located along the southern Oregon and northern California coasts and nearby rivers, including the Applegate River, Chetco River, upper Coquille River, Euchre Creek, Flores Creek, Galice Creek, Illinois River, Elk River, Pistol River, Rogue River, Sixes River, Smith River, Wilson Creek, and Winchuck River and many others. People from the villages in what became Oregon formed a major portion of the peoples removed to the Coast (Siletz) Reservation in the mid-1850s. Today, the Siletz Tribal Language Program focuses on the revitalization of Nuu-wee-ya’ as do language programs led by the Coquille Indian Tribe (Oregon) and Tolowa Dee-ni’ Nation (California).

- *Chetco (Chit-xu)*⁶ – The Chetco River is a 56-mile-long waterway in southwest Oregon that ends just north of the California border. The name Chetco comes from the Indigenous name for one of the villages at the mouth of the river, Chit-xu. Some descendants of the Chetco people continue to live in southern Oregon and are members of CTSI, while many other families live on or near the reservation at Siletz. Chetco families recently collaborated with CTSI and the Port of Brookings to create the Chetco Indian Memorial at the Port of Brookings near an ancestral village site.
- *Euchre Creek (Yuu-k’i)* – Euchre Creek meets the Pacific Ocean near the town of Ophir in southwest Oregon. Hundreds of years ago this place was home to one of the largest villages on the southern Oregon coast. One elder remembered there being more than 100 houses in the village at the mouth of the river. The English name Euchre Creek originates from the Indigenous name for the river, Yuu-k’i, and from the name of the people living there, Yuu-k’ii-che’-dv-ne, which literally means “people who live at the mouth of the Yuu-k’i river.” The name of the creek in southern Oregon was also transferred to the Coast (Siletz) Reservation and applied to a creek and mountain on the reservation where many of the people removed from the original village settled when forced onto the reservation.
- *Tu Tu’ Tun Lodge (T’uu-tut-dvn) and Quosatana (K’wv-see-dvn) Campground* – Several places along the Rogue River are named after historic village sites. T’uu-tut-dvn was the largest village on the southern Oregon coast, so large that one elder remembered that it had “nightlife like a white man’s town.” When people were removed to the Coast (Siletz) Reservation, the English spelling Tututni became a general term to refer to any of the people from the Athabaskan-speaking villages on the southern Oregon Coast. Today, the name has been appropriated by a private camping lodge near the original village site—its sign is clearly visible as you drive up the Rogue River. Just upriver is Qosatana Campground, a U.S. Forest Service campground named after the village of K’wv-see-dvn.

⁶ The Historical Marker Database. (2021). *Chetco Memorial — Chit-xu Village Site historical marker*. <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=176835>

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Shasta Language and Homelands. The Oregon-California border divides Shasta homelands, which include the southern parts of the Rogue Valley as well as the upper Klamath River. In the aftermath of the Rogue River Wars, Shasta people were split between two different reservations, many being forced to the Coast (Siletz) Reservation, while others were confined at Grand Ronde. Other Shasta people managed to hide out in their homelands, and their descendants are part of different federally recognized and unrecognized Tribes in California. The Shasta language is related to Karuk, spoken just down the Klamath River from Shasta territory.⁷

- *Yreka (wáik'a or wariki)* – Yreka is a small town in northern California near the Oregon border. It was established during the Gold Rush era that brought so much violence to the Native people of the region. The town has had many names over the years but eventually settled on the Shasta language term for Mt. Shasta, wáik'a. Mt. Shasta continues to be an important place for many different Tribal people living in the region.

Takelma Language and Homelands. Takelma homelands encompass much of the Rogue Valley in southern Oregon, from near Medford to north of Roseburg. The Rogue Valley saw the bulk of the fighting during the Rogue River Wars in the 1850s, and many Takelma groups were forced at gun point to the Coast (Siletz) Reservation and later to the Grand Ronde Reservation, as well. The term Takelma today is often used to refer to both Takelma (lowland) and Latgawa (upland) villages. The language program of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians has invested greatly in revitalizing and teaching the Takelma language, using recordings and field notes of elder speakers at Siletz.

- *Latgawa Creek (Lat'gāwaʔ)*⁸ – Latgawa creek is the name of a small body of water near Medford, Oregon. The area is the homeland of the Latgawa people, a group of Takelma people living “upland” from their relatives who lived further down the Rogue River. The creek was renamed in 2021 after petitions were filed to change it from its previous name: Dead Indian Creek. This same action also renamed Dead Indian Mountain to Latgawa Mountain and Dead Indian Soda Springs to Latgawa Soda Springs, although the name of the nearby road in the region remains Dead Indian Memorial Road.
- *Ti'lomikh Falls (Ti'lomikh)*⁹ – Ti'lomikh Falls is an important ceremonial site for the Takelma people living along the upper Rogue River. In the 20th century, elders from Siletz worked to bring back their

⁷ Golla, V. (2022). *California Indian languages* (p. 237). University of California Press.

⁸ Oregon Historical Society. (2020). *Change Dead Indian Creek to Latgawa Creek*. https://www.ohs.org/about-us/affiliates-and-partners/oregon-geographic-names-board/upload/USBGN_-_Latgawa-Creek_Review-06May2020.pdf

⁹ Kiesling, S. (2023). *The ceremony at the heart of Salmon Nation*. <https://www.spiritualityhealth.com/articles/2012/01/27/ceremony-heart-salmon-nation>

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connection to this important site, restarting the Salmon Ceremony at the falls, which honors the connection between people and salmon. The new visibility of the Indigenous names for this place reflects the effort and care of the people removed to Siletz to remain connected to their homelands.

Kalapuya Language and Homelands.¹⁰ Kalapuya territory covers much of the Willamette Valley and extends south into the Yoncalla Valley along the upper Umpqua River. This large region is the ancestral homeland of several distinct but related Tribes, whose languages are also distinct but related dialects. After settlers arrived and forced people to sign treaties with the U.S. government, most Kalapuya people were removed to what would become a reservation at Grand Ronde, but some families also ended up at the Coast (Siletz) Reservation or avoided removal altogether, managing to stay on their ancestral homelands. Many modern place names in the Willamette Valley have their roots in the Kalapuya language, and the following terms are only a small sample.

- *Chemeketa (chamígidi)* – Chemeketa Community College in Salem was named after the Santiam Kalapuya word *chamígidi*, the name of a village originally located in the area.¹¹ Nearby is the Chemawa Indian School, one of the longest continually operating boarding schools in the nation. The name Chemawa comes from the Kalapuyan term, *chaméewi?* meaning “place of low-lying, frequently overflowed ground,” a type of place common in the Willamette Valley before dams and development altered the natural course of the Willamette River. Notice how both names start with the /ch/ sound. Many Kalapuya place names begin with this sound, making them easy to identify as the names of a certain place.
- *Yoncalla (yángalat)* – Yoncalla is located south of Eugene in the Yoncalla Valley. The term Yoncalla comes from the name for a band of Kalapuya people whose homelands encompass the upper Umpqua River. According to the U.S. Forest Service, Yoncalla means “home of the eagles” and refers to a specific eagle nesting area in the region. Often, this type of definition reflects distortions and misunderstandings of the original Indigenous meaning, but one linguist thinks there might be at least some truth to this definition, pointing out that *\yank* means “high” in Kalapuya while *\la* means “house.”

Mollala Language and Homelands.¹² The name Mollala, sometimes spelled Mollala, Molale, Molele,

¹⁰ Zenk, H. (2008). Notes on Native American place-names of the Willamette Valley region. *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 109(1), 6–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20615822>

¹¹ Chemeketa Community College. (2020). *Learn about Chemeketa*. <https://www.chemeketa.edu/about/#:~:text=Chemeketa%20means%20%22gathering%20place%22%20in,%22you%20are%20welcome%20here.%22>

¹² Oregon Encyclopedia. (2024). *Molalla peoples*. <https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/molallas/>; Williams, C. (1988). Charles Tufti. *Lane County Historian*, 33(3), 55–59.

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or Molalis, also refers to a language spoken by a Tribe of the same name. The name itself comes from a Chinookan term, mu'laɫɪf. Mollala people, whose territory spanned the Cascade foothills throughout much of western Oregon, from near the Columbia River in the north almost to the California border in the south, refer to themselves as 'la:ti:wi or 'la:ti'ʔaifq. Mollala people fostered connections with Tribes living on both sides of the Cascade Mountains, creating trade and family ties across a huge geographical area. These connections are reflected in the language itself, which has loan words from languages spoken on the eastern side of the Cascade Mountains. This reflects the many historical interactions among speakers of these languages, which occurred in places like shared hunting and fishing camps and during weddings and other celebrations.

- *Mollala (mu'laɫɪf)* – Mollala is a small inland city located about 30 miles south of Portland. The town is named after the Mollala people, many of whom managed to return to the area in the 1860s after forced removal to Grand Ronde. Not many Molalla people ended up at the Cost (Siletz) Reservation, but one of the most well-known Molalla ancestors of Siletz families is Kate Chantelle, sometimes called Molalla Kate. As a teen, Kate was removed to the Grand Ronde Reservation from her home at Dickie Prairie, near the present-day town of Molalla. Eventually returning to her homeland with her family, Kate later married and had children of her own. When two of them attended Chemawa Boarding School, she moved to Salem to be nearby. Both children eventually moved to Siletz, following an older sibling, where they married spouses from the Siletz Reservation and received allotments in the 1890s. Mollala Kate again moved to stay near her children and spent the rest of her days living on the reservation. Today, her many descendants continue to honor their connection to their Molalla ancestry.
- *Tufti Mountain* – Tufti Mountain is a summit outside the town of Oakridge. Settlers named Tufti Mountain for Charlie Tufti, a local Molalla man who was well known to local settlers in the area. Tufti managed to grow up away from the reservation and even secured an allotment of land in his family's homelands near Oakridge in 1884 before eventually marrying a Wasco woman from the Warm Springs Reservation and moving to central Oregon.

Chinook Language and Homelands. Chinookan languages are a family of related languages whose speakers' homelands stretch up the Columbia River from the mouth all the way to the Dalles. Before the construction of dams and the Hanford Nuclear Site, the Columbia River had one of the most productive salmon runs in the world, supporting a large population of related Tribes. The river also served as a major east-to-west trade network, connecting people on the West Coast with the interior of the United States and making the Chinook people living along the Columbia River renowned for their wealth and connec-

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tions. Many place names in the Portland area take their names from Chinookan words.¹³

- *Clackamas* (ʔáq'imaš)¹⁴ – Clackamas is the name of a suburb of Portland as well as a river that runs through the southern end of the Portland Metropolitan Area. The original word comes from the Chinookan name for the entire region, ʔáq'imaš, which many English scholars then used to refer to the Indigenous people of this area. The people themselves used the more specific term giʔáq'imaš, or people of the Clackamas River. This type of simplification is common when Indigenous words pass into English. Not only do English speakers alter the sounds of words to fit English pronunciation, they also simplify the complexity of meanings and geographical connections, which are of great importance to Indigenous people.
- *Multnomah* (máʔnumax) – Multnomah is a common name for many places near Portland, including Multnomah County and Multnomah Falls. According to one recent linguistic paper, the word originates from the Chinookan name for a village on Sauvie Island. The term for that single village was then extended to include the surrounding area, a common pattern for the way Indigenous place names pass into English.
- *Tillamook* (T'ilēmuks)¹⁵ – Tillamook is both a region of the northern Oregon Coast and the name of a town. Both were named after the term for Indigenous peoples whose homelands encompass the area. However, the word Tillamook doesn't come from the Tillamook language at all. Instead, it is based on a Chinook term for their neighbors living to the south. Many modern place names follow this pattern. Settlers moving through an area often first learned of different Tribes from their neighbors and adopted these names instead of terms that people of those Tribes used to refer to themselves.

Tillamook Language and Homelands. Tillamook homelands encompass much of the northern Oregon Coast, from Otter Rock in the south to Tillamook head in Clatsop County. The southern part of these homelands was incorporated into the Coast (Siletz) Reservation in 1855, and while many Tillamook people came to reside on the new reservation others managed to stay in their traditional villages.

¹³ Zenk, H. (2008). Notes on Native American place-names of the Willamette Valley region. *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 109(1), 6–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20615822>

¹⁴ Maxkii, R. (2022). *The meaning behind Oregon's place names*. Travel Oregon. <https://traveloregon.com/things-to-do/culture-history/the-meaning-behind-oregons-place-names/>; Boyd, R. (n.d.). *Chinookan villages of the Lower Columbia*. PDXScholar, Portland State University. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1092&context=anth_fac

¹⁵ Boas, F. (1890s). Field notes on Tillamook and Chinookan dialects: Notebook 1 of 2. *APS - ACLS Collection - S4.1* (p. 120). Note: Spellings for this word differ according to the exact dialect of lower-Chinook. This spelling was used by ethnographer Franz Boas in the 1890s while working with a Clatsop person to record a word list.

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- *Nestucca* (*nəʃt'á'gga*) – Nestucca is today the name for a river just south of Cape Lookout and also serves as the name of the bay, wildlife sanctuary, and local high school. The name comes from the Tillamook word for the place, *nəʃt'á'gga*, and is just one of many place names up and down the northern coast that have their basis in the Tillamook language. The origins of many Tillamook place names are easy to identify by the language's tendency to mark place names with the prefix /ne/. Neskowin (*NəsXwīn*) and Nehalem (*nGélum*) are other examples.
- *Siletz* (*nʃlæ tʃ*) – The term Siletz is a good example of how rumor and assumption can cloud the origin of Indigenous place names in English. Many scholars believed the word Siletz to be a reference to "Saint Celestine," assuming Catholic missionaries chose the name. Other scholars posited equally incorrect theories that Siletz is derived from the Athapascan term *sv-ghvs*, meaning "black bear." Both of these explanations can be found in published literature. In reality, the name Siletz comes from the Tillamook place name *nʃlæ tʃ*, a word that describes the twisting coiled nature of the Siletz River.

Chinook Jargon (chinuk wawa). Chinook Jargon, called *chinuk wawa* in the language itself, began as a trade language developed by Chinookan speakers along the Columbia River to communicate with their Indigenous neighbors. As French- and English-speaking trappers arrived in the Pacific Northwest, Chinook Jargon evolved to incorporate terms from both of these European based languages. Ultimately, it became widely spoken across the entire region, by both Native people and settlers, from northern California to British Columbia. During the forced resettlement of peoples from different language families, Chinook Jargon became a creole (or first) language for many people growing up on both the Siletz and Grand Ronde reservations. Today, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde has developed a modern alphabet for the dialect of Chinuk Wawa spoken at Grand Ronde and teaches the language from Head Start to the college level.

- *Sahalee Falls* (*saxali*)¹⁶ – Sometimes spelled Sahalie Falls, Sahalee Falls is a 100-foot tall waterfall on the McKenzie River between Eugene and Bend, Oregon. The name of the falls comes from the Chinuk Wawa word *saxali*, meaning up or high. Many state and federal parks across western Oregon have names based in Chinuk Jargon, including: Moolak (*mulak-elk*) Beach, Nesika (*nsayka-our*) Beach, and Ollala (*ulali-berries*) Creek.

¹⁶ Atlas Obscura. (2021). *Sahalie Falls, McKenzie Bridge, Oregon*. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/sahalie-falls#:~:text=The%20names%20of%20the%20falls,and%20traded%20in%20these%20lands>