

Sambo Creek: A Short History of a Troublesome Toponym

by Dr. Christopher Brooks

Due to concerns raised by JT Lambert students and the subsequent name-change petitions they collected in the spring of 2008, as well as commentary from various community members, a former Brodhead Watershed Association board member submitted a petition to the United States Geological Survey (USGS) suggesting that Sambo Creek be renamed Reservoir Run. She suggested the name change as a result of hearsay information that Sambo Creek was formerly called Nigger Run according to an 1874 Beers Atlas of Monroe County. She offered support to change the name of a creek that had, in an earlier time, simply substituted one racial slur – Sambo – for another.

After scrutinizing the Beers Atlas and an 1860 map with a seasoned geographer, it became apparent that Sambo Creek was formerly referred to by the even more apparently derogatory term. The name must have derived from local usage, as that was and remains the manner in which the USGS and its state-level predecessors and contemporaries use for geographical places. It is that local usage and theories about the origins of that usage this essay seeks to explore.

Before the 1950s, the US government was not involved in mapping. Especially in the days before GPS, States eventually provided the information needed. Some the toponyms supplied to the USGA were at least colorful if not indeed outright offensive names, such as “Squaw Humper Dam” in South Dakota and “Nigger Point” in New York. In most cases, many locals did not see the harm in the name, reasoning that, in their memory, the given place has never had another name and no one ever complained in the past, so why should anyone now?

About 25 years before the term political correctness was used, then-Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall, who asked his fellow Mormons to drop its bar against Blacks in particular, requested that something be done about the names of places that were clearly offensive to most Americans at the time. In 1962, the USGS obliged. They allowed local people, with the support of local authorities, to change the names of those places. At the time, Sambo appears to have still been at least tacitly acceptable.

Etymological roots of the Sambo

Unknown to many the historical roots of the term do not stop with the seemingly innocuous memories of Helen Bannerman's 1899 *Little Black Sambo*, which became a standard American school book, from the official American version in 1923 until the early 1960s. It gained enough prominence to inspire a cartoon by the same title in the mid-1930s.

The book, like the cartoon, is quaint story in many respects that places Sambo, a young, dark-skinned south Indian boy, as the main character. But the characterization of this English novel made Sambo, like his parent in the story, minstrel-esque. The American adaptation achieved the same outcome. That said, in the context of its time, *Little Black Sambo* appeared to be a harmless take on reality as most European-Americans knew it. However, the usage of the term has far older roots. It is nevertheless curious though not necessarily linked, however, that the reading of *Little Black Sambo* stopped in many schools in the nation at the same time the Secretary Udall was pushing what became a USGS offensive toponym renaming project.

Despite the fact the name Sambo was used as a forename for African slaves, such as President Thomas Jefferson's Sambo Anderson, it was not applied to whites. This is because the word had a clear meaning in eighteenth-century Spanish, with etymological origins that were as follows:

- *Sambo de Mulatto* = White European and Black African
- *Sambo de India* = Black African and Indian
- *Givero* = *Sambo de Mulatto* and *Sambo de Indian*

In English, the term came to mean, according to *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, “an Indian and Negro Half-breed” or “a Negro (slang)”. Thus, a sambo, or zambo, related to a dark-skinned person of African origin, and these distinctions were arguably made for the purposes of differentiation for science and slavery.

To illustrate how the term was used in the English-speaking world in the later eighteenth century, consider the plight of Thomas Jefferson's slave, Isaac, who was captured by the British towards the end of the American Revolution. In a slave narrative about him written toward the end of his life, Isaac recounted the 1781 experience: “One of the officers giv[ing] Isaac [the] name Sambo: all the time fee[d]in[g] him: put a cocked hat on his head and a red coat on him and all laughed.”

In the same year, Issac Jackman's play, “The Divorce” portrayed a subservient Sambo character, arguably for the first time on stage. John Murdock's “The Triumphs of Love” (1798) took on a similar tone. In that play, Sambo is found drunk after his emancipation and made to play the fool as he sings and dances. He is looked down upon for being in dire need of education and likely his inability to attain an educated sounding speech, a reality that often complicated by the paternalistic mindset commonplace in the early American Republic.

Thus, the name Sambo came to refer to an African or Mulatto male who played the cliché village idiot (aka court jester) role, who danced, sang and generally amused his audience. This caricature mirrors the Sambo of the nineteenth-century US that was often depicted in minstrel shows. The fool, also known in England as a “licensed fool,” was allowed to demonstrate a level intellectual shrewdness in order to entertain in that country; the American Sambo was there to play an ignorant role, and no more. After all, the American Sambo was intended to be the ideal “Negro”: an uncultured, ignorant and subservient slave.

Local Rhetoric of the Nineteenth Century

Sambo was not a harmless, commonplace forename of someone of African heritage. As indicated earlier, the usage of the name Sambo was not the same as, say, John or Mary. By the late eighteenth century, the name Sambo had become synonymous with “darkey” or more inimical terms for Blacks, as indicated in early and mid-nineteenth-century newspapers. Here are some local examples from the Stroudsburg Newspaper of the early nineteenth century, *Jeffersonian Republican* (1840-1853)¹:

“Sambo's Description of a Potatoe”.²

The following dialogue is said to have taken place in one of our markets a few days since between a gemmon of color and a huxter:

“Wha' yer ax for dem taters?”

“Fifty cents a bushel.”

“Whoy, I've no 'jections to gib yer fifty cents if I know'd em to be rail genuine. A tater is inevitably bad, unless invariably good, dare is no mediatory in de combination of a tater; de outside may appear perfectly exemplary and beautisome, de inside is a total negative. But if yer wends de article

¹Monroe County first came into existence in 1836 and had been part of Northampton County. As the latter County's first newspaper, *Neuer Unpartbeyischer Eastoner Botbe*, (1793), was in German, there is no record of the English utilization of the term sambo in the local press.

²*Jeffersonian Republican*, February 21, 1840, (Stroudsburg, Pa.) 1840-1853.

on yer own recommendation, knowing you to bo a man of probability in yer transactions, I, widout any furder circumlocution, take a bushel.”

Repudiation³

“Good mornin,” Cuff Links I cum for to ax you for why you no pay dat small account of tree and one pence, which I descended to you troo de hands of my little nigga Bill ?”

“Sambo Sunks, I hub de honor to deform you dat I hab received dat account; and dat I acknowledge de debt; but, sah, let me also deform you dat a change hab come ober de statd of tings, and dat I solemnly repudiate de account, and will nebber pay it, so help me Mrs. Sippi !”

“Cuff, vou is 'a dishonest nigger!”

“No, you brack African, I does but follow de fashion ob de times--I always was a fashionable darky.”

As these examples make plain, the usage of the name Sambo was not innocuous in nature. It depicted an ignorant character.

Further to these examples, the sale of part of Jacob Stroud’s land did refer to Sambo Creek as early as 1806, and, since then, it has been simply used by locals to name a waterway and not to offend.

But, if one looks at early-nineteenth records, he or she will find that the names Sambo, Negro, Negress, and the like where used in place of or in conjunction with the slave’s actual name.

Consider the 1818 federal circuit court case of *Negress Sarah v. Elijah Taylor*, involving the sale of a female slave to serve for a term of years; or the 1801 PA case of *Negro Peter v. William Steel*; or,

“Sambo John”, as indicated in Edinburgh court records. This usage is indicative of a time when Jacob Stroud lived, a time when slaveholding was a norm. It was a time during which Blacks,

“Negroes”, were titled differently because they, both free and slave, were seen as something different under the law.

³*Jeffersonian Republican*, March 16, 1842, (Stroudsburg, Pa.) 1840-1853.

Some other theories on Sambo Creek's nomenclature

The usage of the term for the Sambo Creek in the Brodhead Watershed has mixed oral traditions. Some hold that the name is derived from an African American living along the creek. Below the Woodale Rd. area Sambo creek was always called Sambo (or Samboes) Creek. Only the mid-nineteenth-century "Woodalers", as locals refer to that area's residents, used the more offensive term to refer to the creek. In a 1993 interview, Guad O'Hara, Sr. pointed out that there "were two black families living in Woodale during the early 1900s," the Brown family being the earliest. Records remain unclear on the matter but oral history indicates that a member of another Woodale family, the Posten's, had at least had children with a local Black. It is only conjecture, but, this may have been from the Brown family and would have been a likely reason for locals to refer to the waterway nearest their property as Nigger Run. The only evidence that this name refers to someone with the name living by the creek is based on the oral tradition that there was intermarriage or miscegenation in the Posten Family, as family that lived along the creek in the area where today's Woodale Rd. runs. There were other Black families residing in the Woodale area at other times, but there is no definitive record indicating that these families or any of their respective members inspired the Sambo Creek's naming, or that they resided there before the 1874 Beers Atlas came out. Though this point is not clearly documented, it is clear that the early days during which the Hollingsheads, Strouds and Brodheads and Van Vliets were the major families in the area, the usage of the word Sambo had already taken on a somewhat negative connotation.

A further local oral tradition is that there was a Native American Chief by that name. After consultation with members of and sources about the Shawnee, Munsee and Lenape, there is no evidence of this. One may conjecture, however, that a local tribal member or, perhaps, leader had dark skin and was referred to by the mixed-breed term of the eighteenth century: Sambo. A

member of the Van Vliet family asserts that, according to family oral history, Sambo was a native tribal chief's name. However, after reading the Van Vliet family book, consulting with local tribal leaders and looking at their languages, this could not have been the case. What feasibly might have been conflated into the Van Vliet family history, however, is the fact that "Sibò" is Mohican for river. Though somewhat of a stretch, this would be phonetically feasible if it were not for the fact that the Mohicans were not a predominate tribe in the area around the creek.

Another and, I argue, sounder theory is that the creek was named by Nicholas DuPue, Antoine Dutot or another French settler. The French expression *sans beautie* means "without beauty" in English (thank you, Pat Kennedy for suggesting that I look into this). French scholar Dr. Paul Creamer agreed that it is not a phonetic stretch for someone speaking quickly in seventeenth-century French to an Englishman or other non-French speaker could have interpreted this expression as having been *sans beau*, which could easily become Sambo.

What strengthens this argument is the circumstances under which Dutot came to the US. Between 1791 and 1793, there were multiple slave revolts, which led to thousands of people fleeing the island of Santo Domingo for America in 1793, and ultimately Haiti's independence. As Dutot was a slave-holder whose life clearly would have remained in peril had he stayed in Haiti, the term *sans beau* may have been used to describe the creek because it either:

- 1) was indeed without beauty at the time Dutot first saw it (most likely the lower end of it) or;
- 2) he associated blackness as something without beauty, and thus the deep dark waters earned the name *sans beau* from Dutot.

With either theory, one piece that is certain is that not that many people spoke French in the region; German and English were far more common. Thus, *sans beau* making the linguistic transition into "sambo" is very possible.

In the end, we do not know for certain what the origin of this place name is. It shall be up to the community to decide on which origin is most reasonable, and whether it either collectively believes this place's name sullies local reputation or has historic merit.

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