

# Research Proposal Rhonda L. Thomas

**Project Title:** *People of the Land: A Look at Arkansas's Plain Folk Through a Toponym Lens, 1800-1860*

## Introduction

Many historians now hold the view that “the bulk of the Old South's population (1790-1860)” was composed of a group historian Frank Lawrence Owsley dubbed the *plain folk*.<sup>1</sup> Owsley holds that for some time this group received far less attention from historians than the planter class, the slave class, or poor whites. One reason for this underrepresentation is that the plain folk group left few written histories. What we know of this group is primarily in the form of derivative ethnohistories.<sup>2</sup>

How can we learn more about the early plain folk settlers of Arkansas, many of which have no written histories? Are there any insights to be gained about these early settlers through a study of toponyms?

Historian E. Joan Wilson Miller suggests place names, or toponyms, were “the means of communication” and a “geographical expression of cultural processes that are still dynamic.” Miller suggests that the study of toponyms can serve as a tool for the cultural geographer “primarily concerned with the manifestations on the land of cultural origins, contacts, and migrations” of a group. Miller adds, “distinctive ethnic groups brought their own place names with them . . . and so named the land.”<sup>3</sup>

I believe a study of place names – in particular, place names provided *unofficially* by the plain folk<sup>4</sup> – will offer a richer narrative of Arkansas's antebellum plain folk class, will serve to fill in derivative ethnohistory gaps, and will offer useful insights for future study. During my investigation, I will look specifically at the plain folk who settled the north Arkansas region

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<sup>1</sup> Otto and Anderson note the term “plain folk” was applied to the Upland Southerners by historian Frank Lawrence Owsley in his monograph, *Plain Folk of the Old South*. See John Solomon Otto and Nain Estelle Anderson, “The Diffusion of Upland South Folk Culture, 1790-1840,” *Southeastern Geographer* 22, no. 2 (1982), <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ualr.edu/stable/44370658>, 89; Hyde observes with “few exceptions, scholars have conformed to Owsley's position” that plain folk were “the body of middling southerners” who “overwhelmingly concentrated on agricultural enterprises.” See Samuel C. Hyde Jr., “Plain Folk Reconsidered: Historiographical Ambiguity in Search of Definition,” *The Journal of Southern History* 71, no. 4 (2005): doi:10.2307/27648905, 813.

<sup>2</sup> Fontana describes ethnohistory as the study of “historical records resulting from the contact between literate and non-literate groups;” specifically, the “history of non-literate peoples.” See Bernard L. Fontana, “What is Ethnohistory?” *Arizoniana* 2, no. 1 (1961): 9-11. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ualr.edu/stable/41700798>, 10.

<sup>3</sup> See E. Joan Wilson Miller, “The Naming of the Land in the Arkansas Ozarks: A Study in Culture Processes,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 59, no. 2 (1969): 240-51. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ualr.edu/stable/2561628>, 240.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 240. Miller observes the “process of naming the land was both a folk and an official one,” and that the “geographical expression of these cultural processes provides an insight into the role of the habitat in primary settlement.”

during the period 1800-1860, using toponyms to better understand Arkansas's antebellum plain folk settlers.

### **A survey of place name and plain folk scholarship**

In this study I will look specifically at Arkansas's plain folk class who settled the north Arkansas region during the period 1800-1860 through a toponymy lens. Consequently, in addition to a survey of the literature and main scholarly works published on place names, I include a survey of the plain folk scholarship.

#### Toponyms

John C Branner began the scholarly discourse on toponymy in 1899 when he published *Some Old French Place Names in the State of Arkansas*. Branner's curiosity with the origins of place names was born out of his desire to correctly spell these toponyms on his Geological Survey maps. While his paper offers a modest beginning list of names, he concedes "few of the explanations offered . . . are to be accepted without question." (Nonetheless, the following month, Raoul Renault of Quebec offers several corrections to Branner's work.<sup>5</sup>) Focusing primarily on the "the southern and eastern parts of the state, and to the valley of the Arkansas,"<sup>6</sup> Branner relies on "lithograph copies of the original land-plats of the first official surveys of the state" as his primary source.

In 1937-1938, Norman W. Caldwell undertook the first "independent study of the place nomenclature of Arkansas." Published in 1944 in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Caldwell concedes the "task is still far from finished;" noting that "such a project carried to completion would be an accomplishment of signal value to the history of the state."<sup>7</sup>

In 1945, George R. Stewart published his monograph, *Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States*. Still considered today to be a seminal work in the field of place names, in 1949, James B. McMillan argues that, while Stewart's *Names on the Land* is "unique and valuable . . . nowhere is there a systematic account of the morphology and syntax, the ways of forming and using names of places in American English."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See John C Branner, "Some Old French Place Names in the State of Arkansas," *Modern Language Notes* 14, no. 2 (1899): 33-40. doi:10.2307/2917686, 33; Raoul Renault, Correspondence: "Some Old French Place-Names in the State of Arkansas," *Modern Language Notes* 14, no. 3 (1899): 96. doi:10.2307/2917807.

<sup>6</sup> Branner, *Ibid.*, 33. This is "owing to the fact that trappers and traders . . . traveled chiefly along the navigable streams" and the "Upper White river" was swift and "in places, difficult of navigation."

<sup>7</sup> See Norman W. Caldwell, "Place Names and Place Name Study," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1944): 28-36. doi:10.2307/40027461.

<sup>8</sup> Radding and Western describe Stewart's monograph as "an accessible work now sixty-five years old that has nevertheless aged well." See Lisa Radding and John Western, "What's In A Name? Linguistics, Geography, and Toponyms," *Geographical Review* 100, no. 3 (2010), 398; See James B. McMillan, "Observations on American Place-Name Grammar," *American Speech* 24, no. 4 (1949): 241-48. doi:10.2307/453044, 241.

In 1955 Wilbur Zelinsky observes “generic terms—the common nouns—used to denote geographic features in the United States has been strangely neglected by geographers and linguistic specialists alike,” and that there is a most urgent “need for a series of careful studies of the toponymy of a selected group of communities that will include generic terms, specific names, and vernacular topographic language,” that will “treat these subjects in their full geographic and historical context.”<sup>9</sup> He clarifies further that “there should be research on the source, routing, and destination of the settlers of the United States, with particular attention to the culture and the social psychology of those who were the most active namers.”<sup>10</sup>

The Arkansas Historical Association reprinted John C. Branner’s 1899 *Some Old French Place Names in the State of Arkansas* in the autumn 1960 edition of the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*.<sup>11</sup>

*The Naming of the Land in the Arkansas Ozarks: A Study in Culture Processes*, published in 1969 by **E. Joan Wilson Miller** reemphasizes that “place name or toponym has value as a tool for the cultural geographer who is primarily concerned with the manifestations on the land of cultural origins, contacts, and migrations.” Miller observes the “process of naming the land was both a folk and an official one,” and that the “geographical expression of these cultural processes provides an insight into the role of the habitat in primary settlement, and to the continuum of change in a little-known region of the United States.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1989, Samuel Dorris Dickinson revisits Branner’s 1899 work, offering revisions and several new additions to the list of old French place names.<sup>13</sup>

In 2010, linguist Lisa Radding and geographer John Western make a compelling case that names “are different from other words because they are given consciously, to emphasize specific connotations, as opposed to being arbitrarily assigned.”<sup>14</sup> This reinforces the idea that toponyms can be used to both trace and understand the plain folk class.

### The Plain folk

As with toponymy, I begin my study of the historical scholarship with Branner’s *Some Old French Place Names in the State of Arkansas* because Branner’s paper highlights the missing histories of, at least, the French frontiersmen. Similar to the plain folk, these French

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<sup>9</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky, “Classical Town Names in the United States: The Historical Geography of an American Idea,” *Geographical Review* 57, no. 4 (1967): 463-95. doi:10.2307/212928, 319.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>11</sup> See John C. Branner, “Some Old French Place Names in the State of Arkansas,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1960): 191-206. doi:10.2307/40030643.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, “The Naming of the Land in the Arkansas Ozarks: A Study in Culture Processes,” 240.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Dorris Dickinson, “Colonial Arkansas Place Names,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1989): 137-68, doi:10.2307/40030790.

<sup>14</sup> Radding and Western note, “one can often know the precise history of the person who did the naming: a king, a baron, an explorer.” See Lisa Radding and John Western, “What’s In A Name?” Quoted from pp. 398.

frontiersmen, the first settlers to enter the southern part of the state, also “left but few documents or other records by which their history can be traced.” Even though these traders and trappers came in “considerable numbers,” to tell their stories we rely on “the kind of history and historical records resulting from the contact between literate and non-literate groups.”<sup>15</sup>

Originally published in 1949, Frank Lawrence Owsley’s *Plain Folk of the Old South* is still described today as a seminal work in identifying the “yeoman farmer” middle class and refuting the “popular myth that the antebellum South contained only three classes—planters, poor whites, and slaves.” According to a 1950 review by Atherton, Owsley’s monograph draws on “a variety of primary sources to round out his picture of the common people.” Atherton describes Owsley’s work as depicting “two waves of settlers, the first consisting of herdsman, who subsisted primarily in a grazing and hunting economy, and the second of these coming to possess the land.”<sup>16</sup>

In a 1982 paper examining Newton’s ‘Upland South’ model of upland folk diffusion, Otto and Anderson argue that the model does not explain why Owsley’s plain folk “dispersed so rapidly across the South, or why so few people claimed so much territory, or why families moved so frequently, or why the Backcountry agriculture and economy proved so ‘adaptable’ to the Southern frontier.”<sup>17</sup>

Otto discusses the disbursement of the plain folk in a 1985 paper where he notes, “It is well known that farmers and livestock herders—not wealthy, slaveholding planters—led the westward movement across the southern frontier, settling the Old Southwest, the lower portions of the Old Northwest, and much of the New Southwest during the antebellum period.”<sup>18</sup>

It was some twenty years before Samuel C. Hyde Jr. reconsidered the plain folk in a 2005 paper, noting that both “popular accounts and serious scholarship overlooked or dismissed common southerners until the late 1940s, when Frank L. Owsley challenged the prevailing stereotype by producing the first serious consideration of the largest population group in the

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<sup>15</sup> Fontana, “What is Ethnohistory?” 10.

<sup>16</sup> Atherton also highlights Owsley’s suggestion that “writers have erred in considering mountain and piney-woods folk as agriculturists rather than herdsman.” See Lewis Atherton, “Plain Folk of the Old South. By Frank Lawrence Owsley (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949. xxi + 235 pp. Maps, tables, appendix, and index. \$3.50.),” in *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 37, no. 1 (1950): 127-28. doi:10.2307/1888771, 128.

<sup>17</sup> Otto and Anderson shine a spotlight on how “plain folk families found it necessary to move several times during the antebellum period, seeking out familiar woodlands in which to practice their labor-conserving agriculture.” The plain folk brought this “distinctive lifestyle” with them as they migrated west. See John Solomon Otto and Nain Estelle Anderson, “The Diffusion of Upland South Folk Culture, 1790-1840,” *Southeastern Geographer* 22, no. 2 (1982), <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ualr.edu/stable/44370658>, 96; See also Milton Newton, “Cultural Preadaptation and the Upland South,” in H. J. Walker and W. G. Haag (eds.), *Man and Cultural Heritage, Geoscience and Man*, vol. 5 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, School of Geosciences, 1974), 152.

<sup>18</sup> John Solomon Otto, “The Migration of the Southern Plain Folk: An Interdisciplinary Synthesis,” *The Journal of Southern History* 51, no. 2 (1985): 183-200. doi:10.2307/2208824, 183.

Old South." Hyde argues, the "characteristics of plain folk are neither as clearly defined nor as well understood."<sup>19</sup>

Although there may still be some minor debate over how "clearly defined" or understood are the plain folk class, this survey of plain folk and toponymy scholarship suggests two main ideas: 1) the plain folk are an accepted fourth class, identified as the "yeoman farmer" middle class; and 2) that toponymy is a useful, though under-utilized tool that might not only help explain the plain folk class, but also offer more opportunities to develop engaging plain folk narratives. While there is some periphery discussion on the possibility that traces of this class might be discovered in the names on the land, at this point in my research I can see no practical application of this approach in the scholarship.

### Sources and Methodology

My research will diverge from the historical trend of treating the study of place names separately from the study of the plain folk class. In my research, I will converge these two concepts to draw out and suggest a richer history of this class. To accomplish this, I will study original maps and attempt to trace the names on the land back to their origins. If possible, my research will focus on those place names provided *unofficially* by the plain folk.<sup>20</sup>

#### Plain folk class working definition

From my survey of the scholarship, I offer the following working definition of the plain folk class:

Plain folk are "those among the middle class who farmed;" more specifically, "those engaged in agricultural activities who cultivated approximately 150 acres or less and, if they owned slaves, owned fewer than ten."<sup>21</sup> The plain folk practiced open-range herding, allowing their livestock to forage freely in the "rough pastures and forests of the Southern frontier."<sup>22</sup>

To prove or disprove my supposition, I will consider current scholarship on the plain folk class, including ethnohistories, compile a database of known early settlements, and study this

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<sup>19</sup> See Samuel C. Hyde, "Plain Folk Reconsidered: Historiographical Ambiguity in Search of Definition," *The Journal of Southern History* 71, no. 4 (2005): 803-30. doi:10.2307/27648905, 803. (805).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Miller, 240. Miller observes the "process of naming the land was both a folk and an official one" and that the "geographical expression of these cultural processes provides an insight into the role of the habitat in primary settlement, and to the continuum of change in a little-known region of the United States."

<sup>21</sup> Hyde, "Plain Folk Reconsidered," 813. Through a "synthesis of current historiography," Hyde observes *plain folk* is "not synonymous with *middle class*, but, instead, plain folk are those among the middle class who farmed"

<sup>22</sup> Otto suggests "by 1861 . . . this way of life was common from Delaware to Texas." In the Ozark plateaus of Missouri, he notes, "subsistence agriculture survived into the twentieth century." See John Solomon Otto, "Reconsidering the Southern "Hillbilly": Appalachia and the Ozarks," *Appalachian Journal* 12, no. 4 (1985): 324-31. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ualr.edu/stable/40920908>; See also Otto and Anderson, "The Diffusion of Upland South Folk Culture, 1790-1840," 93.

group through a toponym lens to gain new ideas about these early Arkansas settlers. Relevant secondary sources, to include scholarly monographs and journal articles, will be discovered and interrogated during the beginning phase of this research project. The information gleaned from secondary sources will be used as a starting point in my research. I have presently identified the following facilities and databases to be good sources for primary materials:

- Arkansas State Archives, Little Rock
- Northeast Arkansas Regional Archives, Powhatan
- Charles Hillman Brough Collection<sup>23</sup>
- Library of Congress
- Pine Bluff Jefferson County Library System<sup>24</sup>
- Dunbar and Hunter's Observations, written in 1805
- Thomas Nuttall's A journal of travels into the Arkansa territory, during the year 1819 : with occasional observations of the manners of the aborigines<sup>25</sup>

Primary sources I will examine include maps, surveys, original texts, census returns, and newspaper articles. I will also conduct research-driven fieldwork.

### Timetable

This research project will span the 2019 spring, summer, and fall semesters (January 1, 2019 - December 1, 2019). I plan to devote no less than 12 credit hours to this project during the spring semester and again during the fall semesters. I plan to devote similar hours to the project during the summer semester. My research will adhere to the following timeline:

**Spring semester** I will begin the project by completing a survey of secondary source materials, which will be completed by 1 March. In April, I will conduct research at the Northeast Arkansas Regional Archives. In May I will conduct research at the Arkansas State Archives. Secondary source research and archival research will inform the fieldwork I conduct during this semester.

**Summer semester** During the summer break I will continue my work on this project. By 21 Jun I will have conducted research at the Lawrence County Courthouse. In June I will be researching at the Northeast Arkansas Regional Archives. In early August I will research the Arkansas State Archives. Again, research will inform any fieldwork I

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<sup>23</sup> Caldwell notes the "best single collection of printed materials relative to the subject is the Brough collection of the Little Rock Public Library." See Norman W. Caldwell, "Place Names and Place Name Study." *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1944): 28-36. doi:10.2307/40027461, 35.

<sup>24</sup> The Pine Bluff Jefferson County Library System has an extensive digital Arkansas map collection that dates to 1817.

<sup>25</sup> Branner, "Some Old French Place Names in the State of Arkansas," 33. Branner notes that Nuttall references some of the old French place names and "as he was on the ground before the French origins of the words were entirely lost sight of, his spellings of them are of interest."

conduct during this period. I also anticipate conducting research at several additional courthouses throughout the course of the project.

**Fall semester** With the exception of an additional visit to the Northeast Arkansas Regional Archives in September, the focus during this semester will be on analyzing my research, synthesizing the information, and writing my paper. There may be additional county courthouse research involved as well as fieldwork.

## Annotated Bibliography

This list includes primary and secondary sources I have discovered and found most useful in writing this research proposal. This bibliography does not represent a complete record of all the sources I have consulted, only those I believe will be most beneficial to others who wish to pursue the study of place names, the plain folk, or similar topics. Select entries have been annotated.

### 1. HISTORIC MAPS

Department of Arkansas Heritage. "Research." *Arkansas State Archives*. Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://archives.arkansas.gov/research/search-records.aspx>. The state archives house over 4,000 historic maps of Arkansas and the surrounding regions. This is a very useful resource for all researchers, but the beginning researcher in particular, as many artifacts can be searched for and details discovered online. Note that online search does not cover the full extent of the state archive holdings: Some are available as original documents in the research room, while others are available only on microfilm.

Department of Arkansas Heritage. "Research." *Northeast Arkansas Regional Archives*. Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://ahc.digital-ar.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p16790coll5>. Arkansas Digital Archives, Historic Maps Collection is another valuable resource for the beginning researcher, as select examples of the state archive's more than 4,000 historic maps have been digitized and made available on the state archives website.

Hunter, George. *Western journals of Dr. George Hunter, 1796-1805*. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://archive.org/details/westernjournalso00hunt>. In 1804-1805, William Dunbar and George Hunter made an expedition along the Ouachita River. This journal, which includes maps and illustrations, is a foundation work for any researcher interested in Arkansas place names.

Library of Congress: "Maps." Accessed October 29, 2018. <https://www.loc.gov/maps/>. Contains a useful digital collection of early Arkansas maps with dates as early as 1804. Of particular interest in this collection is the 1835 *Map and profile of the proposed road from opposite Memphis, Tenn. to the St. Francis River, Arkansas T. : exhibiting also, the adjacent country*.

Nuttall, Thomas. *A Journal of Travels into the Arkansa Territory, During the Year 1819: With Occasional Observations on the Manners of the Aborigines*. 1821. Considered the seminal text on botany and cultural encounters in the Arkansas River Valley. Researchers will also find the reprint of the original edition useful. See Thomas Nuttall and Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Nuttall's Travels into the Arkansa Territory*. Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1905, also available in digital form on the Library of Congress Web site <https://www.loc.gov/item/05013013/>.

## 2. TOPONYMS

Branner, John C. "Some Old French Place Names in the State of Arkansas." *Modern Language Notes* 14, no. 2 (1899): 33-40. doi:10.2307/2917686. Branner appears to be credited with initiating the ongoing place-name conversation among scholars. It is worth reading his early work in order to follow the context of the conversation.

Stewart, George R. *Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1945; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967. This monograph is considered the seminal text in place name research and must be read by any researcher new to the topic.

Radding, Lisa and John Western. "What's In A Name? Linguistics, Geography, and Toponyms." *Geographical Review* 100, no. 3 (2010): 394-412. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ualr.edu/stable/25741159>. This is a very engaging article, written from a linguistic point of view that enquires into the meaning of toponyms; specifically, addressing what a name is and how it fits into language. Using the place name *New Orleans* as a case study, Radding and Western go in to some detail on how these nouns are not arbitrary and, in fact, have special meaning and reflect the experience of the people who use them.

## 3. PLAIN FOLK

Hyde, Samuel C. "Plain Folk Reconsidered: Historiographical Ambiguity in Search of Definition." *The Journal of Southern History* 71, no. 4 (2005): 803-30. doi:10.2307/27648905. Hyde reconsiders Owsley's *plain folk* definition. He addresses the challenges of identifying this group and offers a research-based formula for identifying this group that he hopes will establish a starting point for further research.

Owsley, Frank Lawrence. *Plain Folk of the Old South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949. First published in 1949, Owsley's work is still considered a landmark study on, what scholars now refer to as, the *plain folk* class. In this monograph, Owsley draws on a wide range of source materials—firsthand accounts such as diaries and the published observations of travelers and journalists; church records; and county records, including wills, deeds, tax lists, and grand-jury reports—to accurately reconstruct the prewar South's large and significant *yeoman farmer* middle class.

## 4. MISCELLANEY

Fontana, Bernard L. "What is Ethnohistory?" *Arizona* 2, no. 1 (1961): 9-11. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ualr.edu/stable/41700798>. For those new to the term *ethnohistory*, Fontana's article gives a user-friendly explanation of the term. For another interesting discussion, see James Axtell, "Ethnohistory: An Historian's Viewpoint," *Ethnohistory* 26, no. 1 (1979): 1-13. doi:10.2307/481465.