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## The Wapsipinicon: A Love Story or a Swan's Potato?

No one is sure where certain Iowa rivers got their names. Some people believe the following legend about the Wapsipinicon River. (But not all legends are true stories!). Other people think the name came from a plant. Here are both explanations.

### The Legend

Years ago the Sauk and the Meskwaki tribes lived between the Mississippi River and what we now call the Wapsipinicon River. Another tribe, the Dakota Sioux, had long been their enemy.

One day the Sauk were out hunting. They found the body of one of their young men, Swift Deer. Had the Sioux killed him?

The leader Black Wing sent his son Pinnekon and six others to look for clues. When they returned, the Sauk decided the Sioux were to blame. But the Sauk needed help

attacking the Sioux. They asked their friend Good Heart if his tribe, the Meskwakis, would fight with them. Good Heart agreed.

Together, the Sauk and Meskwaki warriors won the battle against the Sioux. When it was over, Good Heart invited the Sauk warriors to his village. Black Wing sent his son, Pinnekon.

In Good Heart's village, Pinnekon met the chief's daughter, Wapsie. Pinnekon and Wapsie fell in love. Good Heart agreed that the two could be married.

Everyone seemed glad about the coming wedding except a Meskwaki warrior named Fleet Foot. He had wanted to marry Wapsie himself.

One day Wapsie and Pinnekon were canoeing on the river. Suddenly an arrow shot through Pinnekon's chest. Wapsie screamed and jumped up to help him. The canoe overturned. Wapsie and Pinnekon sank below the water.

Was it the jealous Fleet Foot who shot the arrow? No one knows. But ever since the day when the two lovers died, the river has carried their names joined together—Wapsipinicon.

## The Plant

The Wapsipinicon was named after the arrowhead plant that grows along streams. The Indians ate the white root of the plant. Waubessa was a native word for white or swan-like. Pinne-ac meant a root like a potato. Over the years the spelling changed from waubessa pinne-ac to Wapsipinicon.

## It's Your Choice

Which story do you think is true? What do the stories tell us about how Native Americans lived?

Source:

- Ginalie Swaim Ed., “The First Iowans to Use the Rivers,” *The Goldfinch* 6, no. 4 (April 1985): 4.

## Pathways

River Transportation

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*Which story do you think is true? Why?*

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## Media Artifacts



Mississippi River From Pike's Peak



Sauk Women and Children, c 1880



Mesquakie Ponder Future



Mesquakies Return to Iowa

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### ***Reading Tip: Rereading and Reviewing***

*Ask yourself questions about the article. Is this important information to record? Can this information be used later?*

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