

**KANAWHA**  
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Over the last 400 years, the name “Kanawha” has been variously associated with an Indian tribe, a river in West Virginia, and a pre-Revolutionary War battle, not to mention the names of several towns, counties, US Navy warships, locomotives, yachts, and insurance companies. At the beginning of the American Civil War it was even an early name for the state of West Virginia, which separated itself from Virginia over the issue of secession. The name “Kanawha” is also famous in York County, South Carolina as the nickname of an early colonial settler who homesteaded in what is now the Fort Mill Township. This settler is known to area residents as Thomas “Kanawha” Spratt.

The word *Kanawha* is widely recognized to be of Native American origin, but the exact meaning is a matter of dispute. An internet search for the English translation of *Kanawha* yielded at least four different versions of the word’s meaning, all of which are contradictory. One source states that *Kanawha* is a Shawnee word meaning “new water,” while another claims it is a Catawba word meaning “friendly brother.” Another popular translation is “place of white stone.” Obviously all of these versions cannot be correct, and my own experience with modern translations of early personal and tribal names indicates that these are often largely guesswork.

The earliest recorded use of the term in colonial America was as the name of a Native American tribe. This tribe, a branch of the Algonquin family, was closely related to the Nanticokes and Delawares who resided in what are now the states of Delaware and Maryland. During the seventeenth century, the name of this tribe was variously recorded by early English settlers as “Conoys,” “Conoise,” “Canawese,” “Cohnawas,” “Canaways,” and ultimately, “Kanawhas.” By the early eighteenth century some of the Kanawhas had migrated to the southwest and settled along the large river in West Virginia that today bears their name.

The Kanawha River is an interesting river for a variety of reasons, and it played an important role in the early settlement of southwest Virginia and the Ohio River region. Arising in the Allegheny Mountains along the border between the modern states of Virginia and West Virginia, the Kanawha River is the largest river in West Virginia and a major tributary of the Ohio River. It is formed by the confluence of a number of smaller rivers, including the New River in Virginia and the Gauley and Elk Rivers in West Virginia, and is remarkable for the fact that it flows from southeast to northwest, one of very few rivers in the United States that does so. It enters the Ohio River near the town of Point Pleasant in Mason County, West Virginia. Although the Kanawha River received its name from the Kanawha tribe, the Kanawha Indians were not the major players in this region during the years of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. The dominant tribe in the area at that time was the Shawnee, and it was their interaction with the early settlers of the region that would eventually give Thomas Spratt his nickname.

Following the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, the British government placed a ban on any further settlement west of the Allegheny and Appalachian Mountains. The Native Americans who lived in this area, especially the Ohio River valley and the present states of West Virginia, Ohio, Tennessee and Kentucky, expected

the British government to restrict the flow of settlers pushing ever westward through the mountain passes. The British government proved unable to do this, and during the years following the French and Indian War clashes between frontier settlers and Native Americans became increasingly frequent and bloody. By early 1774 the tension between the Indians and colonial settlers along the frontiers of Pennsylvania and Virginia had brought matters to the brink of all-out warfare. The Indians along the western frontier of Virginia, in particular the powerful and warlike Shawnee, launched a number of raids against white settlers who were encroaching on their lands. These settlers, in turn, retaliated by attacking Indian villages and committing a number of atrocities against the natives, which caused the Shawnee to finally declare war.

On June 10, 1774, Virginia's royal governor John Murray, better known as Lord Dunmore, called out the militia of western Virginia to put down the Indian revolt; this campaign became popularly known as "Dunmore's War." Dunmore established his headquarters at Fort Pitt (now Pittsburg) and began raising militia from the northern Virginia counties, while ordering Colonel Andrew Lewis to mobilize the militia from the southwestern counties. Dunmore's plan was to march his men down the Ohio River from Fort Pitt while Lewis marched up the Kanawha River; they would join forces where the Kanawha entered the Ohio and then launch their campaign against the Indian towns on the Scioto River. While Dunmore and Lewis were raising their troops, the Shawnee chief Cornstalk began mobilizing his own confederation of Shawnee, Miami, Wyandot (Huron), and Ottawa Indians to attack Lewis before he could rendezvous with Dunmore.

During that same month of June 1774, a Virginia militia officer named Captain Daniel Cresap traveled to South Carolina and recruited 120 Catawba warriors to help put down the Shawnee, who were ancient enemies of the Catawba. Cresap returned to Virginia with the Catawbas and sixteen white men. While crossing the Allegheny Mountains, the party was attacked by hostile Indians and seven of the white militiamen were killed. The Catawbas pursued the hostiles and caught up with them; there was a skirmish and the Catawbas captured two of the enemy warriors. Shortly after this engagement the Catawbas returned to South Carolina. This engagement and other such small battles during the summer of 1774 were the opening volleys of the larger conflict that became known as Dunmore's War, which culminated in a monumental battle on the Kanawha River in October.

As Lord Dunmore languished at Fort Pitt, apparently in no great hurry to push on to the southward, Colonel Lewis and his men advanced up the Kanawha River toward the rendezvous point. On October 10, 1774 the Shawnee confederation under Cornstalk launched a surprise attack on Lewis's militia at the mouth of the Kanawha River near Point Pleasant. Lewis and Cornstalk both had about 1,000 men under their command, and it was difficult for either side to gain a substantial advantage. However, after a terrific battle lasting most of the day, the Indians eventually withdrew and Lewis's troops claimed the victory, without any assistance from Dunmore and his army. Hostilities between white settlers and the Indians along the Virginia frontier ended for a time, only to flare up again during the years of the American Revolution, when most of the western tribes allied themselves with the British against the Virginia settlers.

Around the year 1761, a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian from Mecklenburg County, North Carolina settled just south of the present-day city of Fort Mill, in what is now York County South Carolina, on the historic Nation Ford Road, which was part of the Great

Pennsylvania Wagon Road. Local tradition holds that the Catawba Indians gave Thomas Spratt a tract of land five miles square, or 16,000 acres in size, to live on. Local tradition also states that the Catawbas gave Thomas Spratt his nickname “Kanawha” for his bravery during an engagement on the Kanawha River during Dunmore’s War. However, the Catawbas were not actually present at the Battle of Point Pleasant, as confirmed in a letter from their chief King Prow to Lord Dunmore in April 1775,<sup>1</sup> so it seems likely that Spratt actually earned his title during the Cresap expedition of June-July 1774. Another possibility is that Spratt volunteered for service with the Virginia militia under Colonel Lewis in August or September 1774, and that he was given his nickname because he was present at the Battle of Kanawha or Point Pleasant in October of that year.

Spratt’s military service continued during the Revolutionary War. Along with some of the Catawba warriors, he served under Major William Richardson Davie and General Thomas Sumter in the Patriot victory at Hanging Rock in Lancaster County on August 6, 1780. Spratt was also with Davie at the Battle of Wahab’s Plantation, in Union County, North Carolina, on September 21, 1780, where Davie’s troop made a bold attack on a British outpost and routed the enemy in a skillful engagement, capturing a large number of horses and supplies in the process. The elderly Spratt, now over 50 years of age, received several bullet wounds in his right thigh during the battle, including a shot that grazed his thigh bone.

“Kanawha” Spratt died in 1807 and was buried in a family cemetery near Fort Mill. His tombstone bears the following inscription:

*IN MEMORY OF THOMAS SPRATT, KANAWHA, WHO DIED JULY 21, 1807, AGED 76 YEARS.  
BORN ON SHIPBOARD COMING TO AMERICA WITH HIS PARENTS.  
IN FRIENDSHIP HE WAS EVER TRUE, HIS HEART SINCERE, LIKE HIM BUT FEW;  
HIS BLOOD WAS SPILT IN FREEDOM’S CAUSE, RATHER THAN SUBMIT TO BRITISH LAWS.*

From an ancient Indian tribe in Delaware to a river in west Virginia, from an important colonial battle to an early Fort Mill settler, the word “Kanawha” has taken root on the York County landscape and survives today as a fitting tribute to the memory of Thomas “Kanawha” Spratt.

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<sup>1</sup> The Catawbas had been accused by members of the colonial Virginia government of having been allied with the Shawnees against the Virginians, and of having fought alongside the Shawnee at the Battle of Point Pleasant. Considering the long-standing hostility between the two tribes, the idea was (and still is) ludicrous, but nonetheless King Prow sent a very diplomatic letter to Lord Dunmore explaining that his people were at home in their villages on the Catawba River at the time and were nowhere near the battle.