[illegible] 1903

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Boston, April 19, 1903

My dear Professor Mason:

I have been looking up the matter of the name Kowak. Pronounce the a obscure – the Urlaut, in short – and this spelling represents very well the name as I heard it at Point Barrow. The name is pure Eskimo, meaning "great river" – kew [kō, or kōk], river, and the augmentative termination -wak (more familiar to me in its Point Barrow form -pak).

"Kobuk" is a word that an Eskimo absolutely couldn't pronounce, but I can very easily believe that it represents the "local usage" – of

the miners, for while I never knew an Eskimo who was able to pronounce the letter b, one of the commonest errors of the illiterate white man in trying to pronounce Eskimo words, is to substitute b for w between two vowels. I used to hear this again and again among the sailors in the Arctic, and I have frequently noticed it in the books published by the recent Cape Nome miners.

Now, as to literature: The original authority for the name appears to be Dr. John Simpson, Surgeon of the Plover, who wintered two years at Point Barrow. See his "Observations on the western Esquimaux and the country they inhabit" p. 918, and map, & in Further papers relative to the recent arctic expeditions in search of Sir John Franklin. London, 1855. [Parliamentary Document]. Other geographers appear to have followed Simpson. I haven't access to a set of Admiralty charts, but my guess is that you will find Kowak appearing in them about 1855.

I heard the name only from Point Barrow natives, but comparison with another word - it would take too long to explain the whole story - convinces me that they used the form they had heard from the natives of that region. I think there is absolutely no reason for change, especially to the mongrel "Kobuk".

Sincerely yours
John Murdoch