

## The Mountain Was Wronged: The Story of the Naming of Mt. Rainier and Other Domestic Names Activities of the US Board on Geographic Names

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After the Civil War in the United States (1861-1865) there was a sudden burst of exploration of western territories. It was accompanied by scientific investigations and an increase in mapping programs of the Federal Government. Reports and maps from these areas carried a large number of place names whose spellings showed variations in many instances. Because of this problem, several leading cartographers, geographers, and others concerned with documenting geographical information approached President Harrison and persuaded him to create a special organization to arbitrate names' questions and to establish official and standard names for Federal use. In 1890, the US Board on Geographic Names was born, and since that time has grown from a small organization concerned principally with domestic United States names to an interagency body with a staff of toponymists and linguists involved with names' questions on a worldwide basis.

From the beginning, the Board has governed its domestic actions largely on the basis of local, established usage. Sometimes, considerable study and correspondence are required to determine local usage, but every effort is expended in this direction. This principle – which was set forth in the beginning – still stands, but where local usage is conflicting, transient, or considered derogatory for some reason, the Board<sup>1</sup> may seek or even insist on an alternative name as an officially acceptable name. Here it should be understood that the Board does not arbitrarily apply names to places and features in the United States (or anywhere else under sovereign administration). With a few exceptions, local authorities agree with Board determinations about names, but the Board's decisions have, in the last analysis, mandatory effect only on Federal maps, charts, or other official documents and publications.

Although it may seem that almost everything in the United States has

been named, proposals for new names are received at an average of about 15 a month, which requires the Board to grant or withhold approval from an equal number of sponsors who have various reasons to name particular features. The Board has developed reasonable practices where names are concerned. From the beginning, it has had a firm policy not to approve names that honor living persons. Although this policy may seem unduly restrictive, it has prevented the naming of features on the basis of self-glorification and political patronage. Since the primary goal of the Board is to standardize place names for the national benefit, it should not get involved in making subjective judgments on the worthiness of living people to be honored. Nevertheless, place names make wonderfully inexpensive, long-lasting, and prominent memorials. The Board throughout most of its history has been subject to various forms of pressure from persons in high positions who wish to change or make exception to the Board rules. The Board, however, has not wavered; only in one case has it been forced to override its "living-person" rule, and that occurred only after a year of stubborn resistance and a direct threat from President Calvin Coolidge that he would abolish the Board if it did not approve eight names in Alaska honoring an equal number of prominent people.

Normally, Presidents are sympathetic to the Board's activities, especially the living-person policy. Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson strongly supported its mission and policies. Franklin D. Roosevelt asked that no effort be made to name a natural feature for him. Harry Truman was inadvertently embarrassed by the efforts of a small community in Texas that changed its name from *Mesquite Tap* to *Truman* in 1945. After learning about the matter, he wrote to the Secretary of the Interior, who then directly managed the Board, saying "I knew nothing about the change of the name of the place in Texas to my name. In fact I was not consulted in the matter at all. I agree with you heartily that these changes should not be made without some sort of approval. I have no desire to have towns, streets, roads, trees or anything else named for me."<sup>2</sup>

During the 94 years of "arm-wrestling" with countless advocates seeking the vicarious pleasure of at least naming a feature (in most cases long since discovered by someone else), several major cases stand out.

Probably the best known case in the last 20 years was when the Board changed the name of *Cape Canaveral* in Florida to *Cape Kennedy* in 1963. This was done at the request of the Administration during the emotional atmosphere following the assassination of President Kennedy. The choice of feature seemed logical at the time, as Kennedy had been a prime mover of the manned space-flight program which was centered at

Cape Canaveral. *Canaveral*, however, was one of the older names of European origin still used for a part of the United States. It was a commonly used descriptive name meaning “reedy or grassy” that appeared on Spanish cartography of the 1540’s and was applied to the prominent Florida cape. To the surprise of many, the renaming in 1963 raised a storm of protest and controversy that intensified over the years. People from Florida and elsewhere in the country wrote thousands of letters. Numerous newspaper articles were written, and several bills were introduced in both houses of Congress – all seeking restoration of the name. Ten years later, in 1973, the Board restored the historical name *Cape Canaveral* and it resumed its place on the map.

Great flurries of commemorative naming are associated with the highly charged emotional atmosphere surrounding the untimely death by assassination of Presidents. The president with the most features named after him is William McKinley, not John Kennedy as most people think. Numerous schools, towns, rivers, and mountains bear McKinley’s name. This brings us to a case that is still pending today. In 1896, William A. Dickey, a prospector, wrote an account of his adventures in Alaska in the *New York Sun* after returning to the “States.” He said that he named a high mountain in the Alaska Range “after William McKinley of Ohio who had been nominated for the presidency, and that fact was the first news we received on our way out of that wilderness.” William McKinley was recognized as the great protagonist of the gold standard, a cause which Dickey supported. Federal mapping agencies and the Board on Geographic Names, however, thought the name inappropriate because it was contrary to the Board’s living person policy. Even the Geological Survey, which was mapping the area at the time, was not going to use the name given by Dickey. This was before the President was assassinated in 1901, but afterwards it was felt inappropriate *not* to use the name.

Although the new name did not get much publicity, there were objections from the beginning to naming such a magnificent mountain for a person. The Reverend Hudson Stuck, Episcopal Archdeacon of the Yukon, and one of the mountain’s first climbers, strongly advocated restoring the original Athabascan Indian name *Denali*, meaning the “large or great one.”

Through the years there has been consistent pressure by people in Alaska and elsewhere to change the name. In 1975, the Alaska State Legislature passed a resolution requesting the Board to change the name of *Mount McKinley* to *Denali*. In December 1977, after several public meetings and over 25,000 letters and signatures both for and against the name change, the matter was taken up by Congress for decision, where

the case still remains. The Board will not rule on a case that is also being considered by Congress.

When the Board was created in 1890, it found itself in the middle of one of the great name controversies of all time. In 1868, a developer located a town on Commencement Bay in the state of Washington in view of a magnificent snowcapped mountain that was named in 1792 by Captain George Vancouver for his friend, Rear Admiral Peter Rainier. The town was called *Tacoma*, which was reportedly the Indian name for the mountain. In 1883, an influential director of the Northern Pacific Railroad and president of the Tacoma Land Company decided to help publicize the town by applying the name *Tacoma* to the mountain in land company and railroad literature. Railroad influence was strong in the Northwest, and there was considerable rivalry among new towns, in this case between Tacoma and Seattle.

One of the early decisions of the Board was to support the name *Rainier* for the mountain. The name had excellent ancestry by geographers' standards. The Northern Pacific Railroad finally settled on Seattle for its terminus, thus weakening the position of Tacoma, and in 1899, Mount Rainier National Park was established by Congress. Tacoma felt like "a cast-off mistress and took the offensive."<sup>3</sup> The Tacoma Academy of Science was created and its first and only publication was dedicated to establishing arguments supporting the name change. By 1910 the arguments became a crusade and the battle-cry became "the mountain was wronged"; in addition, Rainier was anti-American because he was on the British side during the American Revolution.

By 1917, Tacoma's influence was strong enough to have the Washington State Legislature pass a resolution memorializing the Board to consider changing the name of the mountain to *Tacoma*. The Board held a hearing, and considerable testimony was heard from both sides of the issue. On the basis of the hearings, the Board declined to reverse its earlier decision because it had become clear that the name *Tacoma*, if it were indeed derived from a Northwest Indian language, seemed to have been a common term for all snowcapped mountains. Besides, as it turned out, Peter Rainier was a highly respected man, not a privateer as charged. In fact, he became Admiral of the Blue in 1804, was elected to Parliament in 1807, and on his death bequeathed part of his estate toward reduction of the British national debt.

Here the story should have ended. After all, Tacoma had fought valiantly, but lost. However, between 1917 and 1924, the campaign continued and became so furious that a bill was introduced in Congress to legislate the sought-after change in name. Within a short time, a wave of

protest developed in the State of Washington over the proposed change. Congress never took action on the bill. The issue is still not dead, however, because the Board gets a few requests every year to consider changing the name of Mount Rainier to *Mount Tacoma* or *Takhoma*.

Many persons object to the practice of naming major landscape features for people, which accounts for public reaction to the names *Cape Kennedy*, *Mount McKinley*, and *Mount Rainier*. The feeling is not new. It was expressed poignantly in mid-19th century prose by Susan Fennimore Cooper, daughter of the American novelist. She said that there is no reason why the names of distinguished and honorable men cannot

occasionally be given to towns and counties, or to any mark drawn by the hand of society upon the face of a country . . . however, another class of words is more appropriate for natural features of the land . . . Consider a mountain peak stern and savage, veiled in mist and cloud, . . . and say it be not a miserable dearth of words and ideas to call that grand pile by the name borne by some honorable gentleman . . . close buttoned to chin.

The idea that the nobility of nature can be blemished by the naming process stems from the misunderstood relationship between man, names, and those things which are named. An extension of this idea can be found in a relatively recent policy of the Board. Giving names to unnamed features in “wilderness areas” and parks under the jurisdiction of Federal agencies is now restricted. The Board says that names detract from the wilderness character of a region. This policy has led to a large number of head-on collisions with the naming public. American namers generally are not humble. The features chosen often approach the monumental, and, unfortunately, most of the biggest and highest of nature’s features almost always fall within a wilderness area or park.

Of course, not all problems that come before the Board involve the naming of features for people. Another interesting case involved the Colorado River and the State of Colorado. The name *Colorado*, meaning “reddish,” was given the river by the Spanish in Arizona during the 17th century. So, in a sense, the name originally belongs to Arizona. The river’s two main tributaries, the Green and the Grand, were named separately during the 19th century before it was realized that they were part of the Colorado River system. In 1861, a new Territory was being organized in the central Rockies and several names were considered by Congress. *Colorado* was chosen because it was thought that the Colorado River headed in the mountains of the new Territory. This may have been true geographically, but not by name, as was later found. When Colorado became a State in 1876, there was concern that the name “was not legitimate” because the Colorado River did not head in the territory where it should. A logical solution to the problem would be to change the name

of the Grand River which arises in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. The Board took up such a suggestion in the 1890's. But because the Grand River had a well-established local and published usage, and because it also flowed through Utah, the Board did not change the name. Besides, the longest and straightest branch of the Colorado is the Green River which would therefore be the most logical extension of the Colorado. The State of Colorado then took the matter to Congress. On July 25, 1921, a law was passed and "the river heretofore known as the Grand River, from its source in the Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado to the point where it joins the Green River in the State of Utah and forms the Colorado River, shall be known and designated on public records as the Colorado River." The Board's decision on the retention of the name *Grand River* was overruled.

Occasionally, however, persistence wins out over political pressures. After the Spanish-American War, the members of the Board were aware of critical legislation being considered by Congress that would fix the spelling of the newly acquired Caribbean island as *Porto Rico*. The Board tried to convince key members of Congress that the *Puerto Rico* spelling was correct and more acceptable to the citizens of the island. Congress, however, was not convinced and the name *Porto Rico* was officially adopted for Federal use. Thirty-two years later, in 1932, Congress decided it had made a mistake and changed the name of the island to *Puerto Rico*.

Although the Board occasionally deals with major cases which receive national and international attention, most of its work is on a much simpler scale. Many of the cases deal with such items as changing *Mole Hill*, West Virginia, to *Mountain*; putting *Goose Pimple Junction*, Virginia, on the map; and recognizing *Hell* in Michigan. In 1979, the Board was honored by a visit from the renowned photographer Ansel Adams, who made a personal appeal to have a small beach in the Monterey area of California named for a friend and fellow photographer, Edward Weston, who died in 1958. The name was unanimously approved and can now be found on maps of the area.

Conflicts are generally resolved without fanfare and newly proposed names are approved or rejected according to longstanding policies and procedures. The living person policy, of course, causes the most disappointment to name proposers. On occasions these rebuffs can be bitter-sweet, as in the case of the man who was quite upset when the Board refused to name a small lake in Alaska for his new wife. Several years later, after his divorce, he wrote thanking the Board for its inadvertent service in his behalf.

Then there was the problem a Geological Survey fieldman had in proposing the name of a quadrangle map in New Mexico. Since quadrangle maps are named for the most prominent feature on the map, he had difficulty trying to explain his choice of name. He sent the following report to his office:

The Sherman quadrangle is named after the town of Sherman. There is no town by the name of Sherman. The chief center of population of the Sherman quadrangle is called Dwyer, but the post office at Dwyer is called Faywood Post Office. Faywood Post Office used to be located at Faywood, but since Faywood no longer exists it was moved to Dwyer. It is not possible to name the Sherman quadrangle the Faywood quadrangle because there already is a Faywood Station quadrangle adjacent to the Sherman quadrangle. Faywood Station is, of course, the station of the town of Faywood, which no longer exists. In the days when it did exist it was located in the Sherman quadrangle, about three miles east of Faywood Station.

As was mentioned above, there is no town by the name of Sherman. This is because the town of Sherman is really called San Juan. However, because there is another town by the name of San Juan somewhere else in New Mexico, they had to call the post office Sherman Post Office. It was named after Sherman. San Juan is not in the Sherman quadrangle, but about a mile north of it.

What's in a name, indeed!

<sup>1</sup>Originally, the Board approached domestic and foreign names as a single category of toponymic questions. Since 1947, when the board was re-established under Public Law 242-80, domestic and foreign names have been handled by separate committees working as agents of the Board but under its overall control. Work described in this paper that took place after 1947 applies to the BGN Domestic Names Committee.

<sup>2</sup>Except as noted, all information was obtained from the records of the US Board on Geographic Names.

<sup>3</sup>See George R. Stewart, *Names on the Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967), pp. 364–372, for a full account of the case.