New St. Gets a Name

Marion O. Harris

Abstract

Morristown, New Jersey, got a new street in 1981. We know its complete history, including particularly its series of informal and, at last, formal names. Members of the Town Council conducted their naming process publicly, stating the reasons for their suggestions, finally deciding on *Water Street*. Odonymic history is made of such events.

*****

Street name research ought to be easy. All you need is a good set of reference tools: a complete municipal archive, town maps dating to the first settlement, microfilms of the area newspapers, maybe a set of street directories. Lots of luck. In the real world, records are there, often in profusion but usually unindexed. References to street names, or even to discussion of the naming process, are of such low priority that they seldom appear in minutes, and the only information is in the formal naming, renaming, or abandoning ordinances. You're lucky if there's an index. Early maps — for example, those from the 1700s in New England and the early 1800s in New Jersey — show land identified by owner and some streets in place but not named. Those with names are called things like *Kings Highway* and *the Baskingridge road*, which are descriptions as much as they are names; even their syntax in contemporary documents is not the syntax of proper names. As for newspapers, small towns rarely had them, or at least rarely preserved them, and again they are probably not indexed. Like street directories, which are very good indicators where they exist, local newspapers most likely will not pre-date the 1850s.

So in practice it is usually impossible to answer questions about the first use of a street name. Even guesses must be hedged around with caveats, because experience warns us that streets have their names changed very often. For this reason, sitting one evening at a meeting of the Morristown (New Jersey) Town Council, I was enthralled to find myself in the presence of onomastic history: they were going to name a street.

In 1971, Morristown acquired an urban renewal project. Not that the town was urban, or needed renewing, but as usual in such cases there was some property near the center of town that supported only small businesses and low-cost housing, and the developers could not resist. Soon there was only a large hole at the site — a hole which stood gaping for ten years while officials and developers wrangled, paid lawyers, and pointed fingers, and the displaced tenants starred in indignant newspaper sagas of the wandering homeless. At last, in 1981, the game closed to a draw. Three glass towers marked the hatchet buried between ratables- hungry politicos and the defenders of human-scale architecture. "That was our bargain," said Margret Brady, a former town councilwoman whose support of the residential quality of life has done more than any other one person's efforts to awaken the community to its historic inheritance; "'they' got Headquarters Plaza, and we got a five-story height limit everywhere else in town." Three glass towers, and a new street.

The Morristown street pattern is dominated by a set of spokes radiating from the square corners of the Green, a New-England style common that was probably not created quite as early as the 1714 date alleged by its historic marker. The 1969 zoning map (Fig. 1) shows two
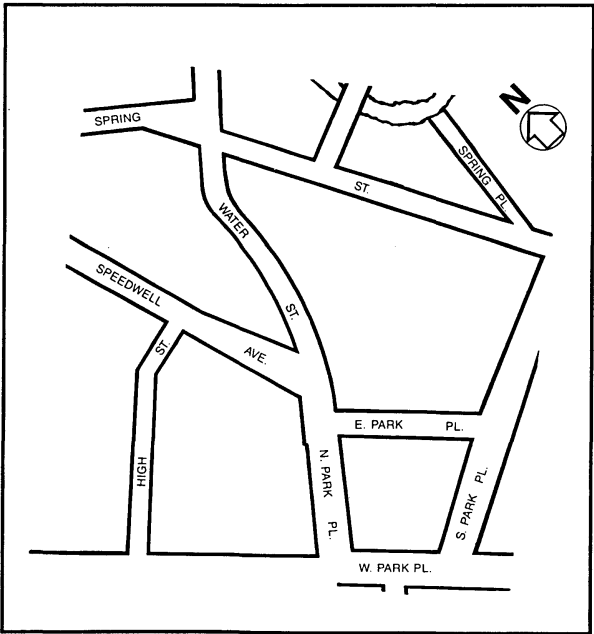

Fig. 1. Downtown Morristown street pattern in 1969 (from *Town of Morristown*).

spokes at the northwest corner, Speedwell Avenue and Water Street, but in Revolutionary times (Fig. 2) there was only Water Street, so called, probably, because it led to (or from) the Whippany River. This is an innocent-appearing stream on whose banks Indian artifacts have long been found at many spots along its sinuous meander through Morris County. The flood-plain area near the center of Morristown is broad, and it is believed that the original town settlers, New Englanders who had come first to Newark, built their grist mill near the point where Water Street crossed the river.

The following excerpts from an article in the *Morristown Daily Record* on February 2, 1971, are written, says an editor's note, "in language appropriate to the settlers [of early Morristown]":

> Water Street was born in 1715 of an old Indian trail. It began life as Town Hill, bisecting the original site of the settlement of West Hanover, later known as Morristown. The first residents did choose the location because of the salubriety of the air and the proximity of the Whippanong River, which provided not only a convenient source of power but an avenue of transportation as well. For this reason, it seemed good and reasonable to transform Town Hill into Water Street. . . . There were. . . on Water such necessary establishments as grist mills and saw mills, a tanyard and a distillery—as well as many homes. . . . It was said by some that the roadway of Water was not of the best. By 1800, it was traversed less by pack animals
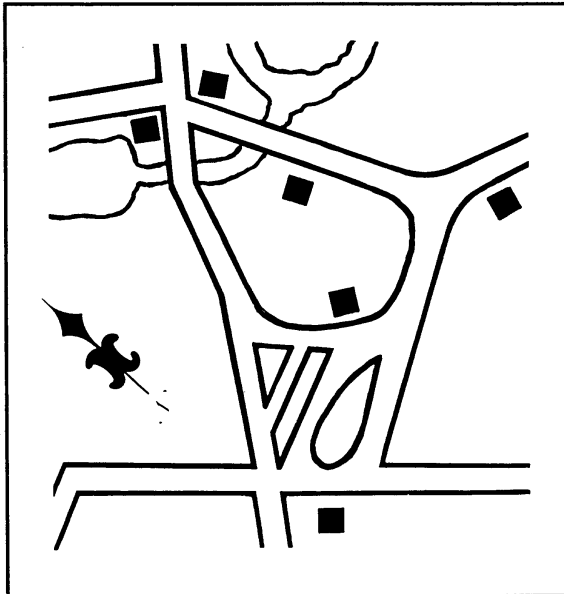

Fig. 2. Morristown street pattern in 1776-81 (from *Plan of the Town Spot of Morristown*).

> than by sleds, wagons and stages. . . . In the later years, Water was the home
> of many sturdy, hard-working citizens — tinsmiths, police, a blacksmith,
> dressmaker, woodworker, carpenters. There was also a saloon. ("Rest in
> Peace")

Councilwoman Mary Rolio, who grew up in Morristown's original
Italian neighborhood around Flagler Street, remembers taking short cuts
to town along Water Street. "It was twisty and scary," she says, "not a
good place to be. You had to be sure you got home from there before
dark" (Rolio).

Here today, on the lowest land in the municipality, is the community
known as *the Hollow*, site of drug traffic, crime scenes, and — predict-
ably — the mostly-black public housing built in response to violent racial
protests in the '60s. And here too — equally predictably — looms the
threat of displacement from the urban renewal project on the hill. The
intersection of Water and Spring Streets is the center of the Hollow.
From there northward, Water Street crosses the river, goes under the
tracks, up the hill on the other side, and on out into Morris Township to
the major artery called Hanover Avenue. In 1855, when Evergreen
Cemetery was built (Morristown's answer to the ultra-fashionable
Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn), the part of Water Street north of
Spring was called "the road from Morristown to Scott Hill";[1] in 1909 it
was renamed *Evergreen Avenue*.[2] The area was a comfortable middle-
class neighborhood; most of the pleasant nineteenth-century houses are
standing today. But the demographics have changed. In 1971, *Evergreen
Avenue* up to the Township border became *Martin Luther King Avenue*.[3]
While it is not clear exactly how far north of Spring Street the name *Water
Street* applied, by 1970 the street was a mere stump of its former extent.
Urban renewal completed the amputation ("Ordinance").

The glass towers of Headquarters Plaza front on Speedwell Avenue;
at least, we call it that today. It is part of Route 202, a very old, wandering
highway, rumored to have begun as an Indian trail, that originally linked
Baltimore, Maryland, and Bangor, Maine. But this block of Speedwell
Avenue did not exist in Revolutionary times. It was built in about 1799[4]
and called *Bridge Street*, part of a short cut out of the square to the
northwest. The bridge crossed a small stream that flowed into the lake
visible in Fig. 3. Speedwell Avenue, so called in the nineteenth century
because it headed northeast out of town to the iron works at Speedwell
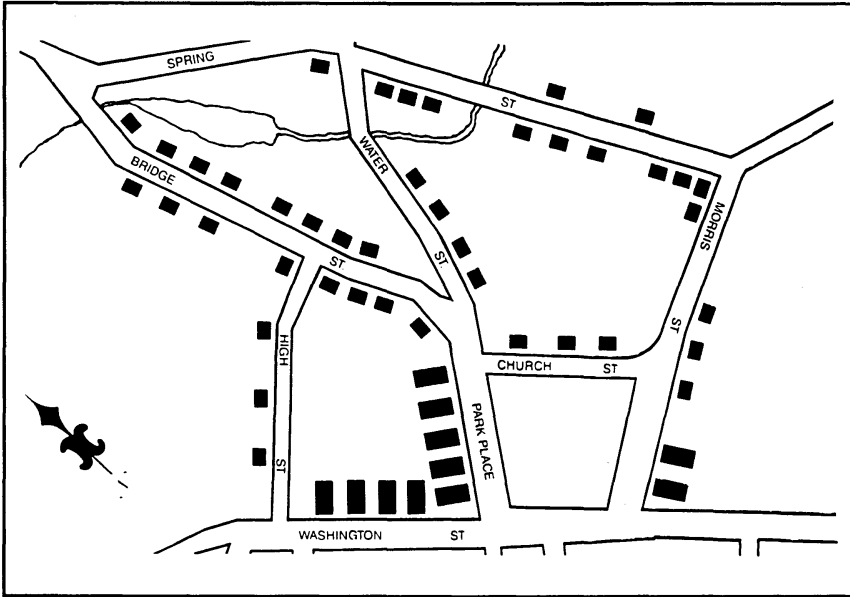Lake (the speedwell is a kind of wild flower, and also the name of one

Fig. 3. Morristown street pattern in 1868 (from Beers' *Atlas*).

vessel that brought early settlers to Massachusetts), first began where Spring Street ended. But although Bridge Street was seen as a logical extension of Speedwell, the ordinance changing its name was not passed until 1872 (*Charter* 112). Both the lake and the stream have long since been filled in, and the bridge is no longer noticeable.

The renewal project, three towers and a park, entirely fills the space between the Presbyterian Cemetery and the intersection of Spring and Speedwell. One of the project's selling points was the construction of an underground parking garage. In fact, the garage was considered so desirable that the Town agreed to build and maintain it itself. Only later was it discovered that the garage area under one tower was misdesigned: so many supporting columns were required that cars could not maneuver, and the space now stands empty. Garage access required the creation of a short, nearly straight road connecting Spring Street and the northeast corner of the square. Fig. 4 is a diagram of its location, but of course it appears on no maps because legally it has not so far existed. The little road has had its share of problems: it joins the square abruptly
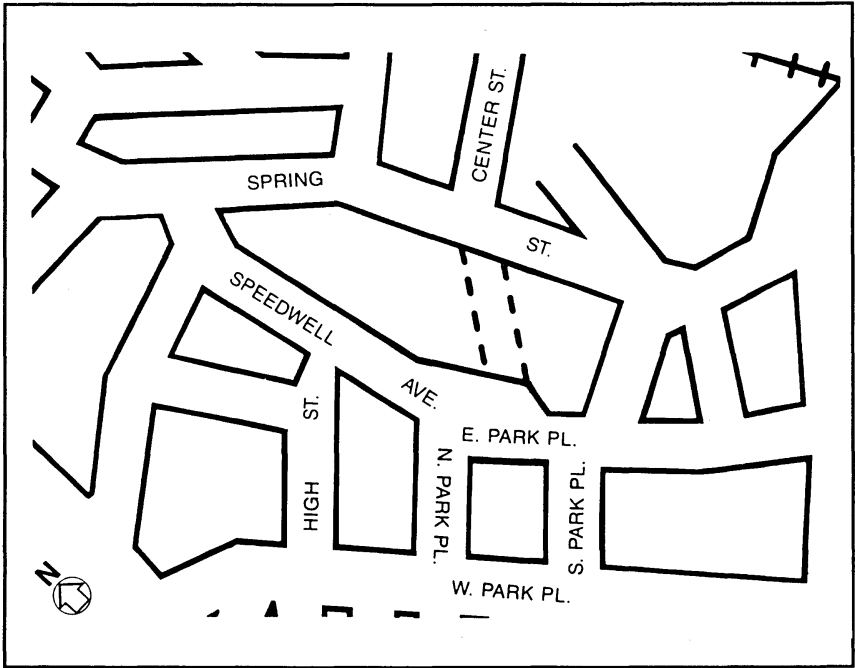
Fig. 4. Morristown street pattern in 1981. Dotted lines show the present *new* street (from *Boonton*).

and invisibly, its presence stirs unexpected perturbation in the traffic patterns at both ends, and its pavement periodically sinks below the surface. A particularly hideous new fountain, shaped like a tall tropical termite nest and constructed of rough rocks in unsanitary-seeming colors, further blocks the emerging driver's view.

This street, which borders the earliest project building, known as *1776*, was built to facilitate construction, probably in 1981. But plans for the project had predicted its existence for ten years, and the Town Council had fallen into the habit of calling it "*the* new street." These italics reflect the exaggerated emphasis placed on the definite article by all three of my informants, people who participated in the Council discussions. They are distinguishing between this early, generic phase of reference — dated by Margret Brady as about 1973 — and the phase which came somewhat later, when the street was open for public traffic, discus-

sions were more urgent, and the article was no longer used.

Bill Chambers, our very knowledgeable Town Clerk and cranial archive, reports police complaints of confusion because the town already *had* a New Street — which, Mr. Chambers says, got its name in the same way, moving from informal description to confirmation by ordinance.

There was some question in the Council's mind about whose job it is to find new street names. Some said that the Council does it, others the Planning Board. But according to New Jersey law the Board's naming jurisdiction extends only to streets created in subdivisions, and this is a municipal street (Chambers). The ball bounced back to the Council.

Over the years there were references to the situation, as different councilpersons saw in it a chance for commemoration. These suggestions, Margret Brady says, which involved the names of people who were either connected with the urban renewal project or newly dead, invariably fell afoul of political animosities and came to nothing. Mrs. Brady and Mary Rolio remember *Stirone Place* (Marco Stirone was mayor in 1965-66, and is still alive); *Bea Jenkins Drive* (she was a black Council member who died during the Time of the Hole); *Scherzer Way* (Carl Scherzer was town engineer and dean of local historians); *Costanzo Place* (James V. Costanzo was Morris County surrogate); *Todd Street* (Parsons Todd was another former mayor and local benefactor). *Veterans Way* was also a suggestion that did not catch fire.

A christening became really necessary only when the Department of Transportation proved unable to install traffic control devices on an anonymous lane. Then in 1983 the children of the Morris School District were invited to submit candidate names for the street. Teachers advised them to steer away from such overused references as Washington and Lincoln, and also from names that were unknown outside of individual families. Unfortunately, the entries received fell exclusively into these two categories, and so the contest results were quietly laid aside (Chambers). But the issue could not be avoided forever, and at last, on September 16, 1986, it appeared on the Council agenda.

The Morristown Council consists of seven members, and frequently votes 4-3. The usual block of four comprises Council President E. Constance Montgomery, who is black, Council Vice President Patricia Koch, Councilman Anthony Tartaglia — these three ran in the last election as a team — and the other black Councilperson, William Barber. The opposi-

tion group, somewhat more loosely organized, consists of former mayor Donald Cresitello, Councilwoman Mary Rolio, and Councilman Bernard Flanagan. The historic political connections of these people intertwine in Laocoönian conflation. By registration, Mrs. Rolio is a Republican, and the others are Democrats. But this is not your standard two-party bifurcation, for animosities engendered by old betrayals seethe behind the façade of party loyalty. Pleasant agreement is all but unknown in the Council chamber.

At the September 16 meeting, Mrs. Montgomery polled the group for suggestions.[5] Mr. Flanagan offered *Cresitello Terrace* "or something, because of what he did for [the urban renewal project]," (Councilman Cresitello, an electrical contractor, originally had the electrical concession for the entire project.) and then commented that the name would be too long. He also suggested commemorating "ex-mayor Stirone" because he "created the idea of the project." He added, "We had a street taken away, Water Street, which was a long-time street in town." His fourth proposal was "Nast Drive or something, in honor of Thomas Nast." (Cartoonist Thomas Nast [1840-1902] was living in Morristown when he began using the donkey and the elephant as political party symbols.)

Mrs. Rolio's entries were, first, *Water Street*, "to replace what was taken away"; second, *Park Plaza*, though she commented that a similar name is in use for a development in another part of town; and third, *Veterans Way* "in honor of all the veterans who have sacrificed their lives on behalf of the residents of this community and country."

Mrs. Montgomery suggested *Patriots Way*, or *Jenkins Drive* "in honor of Bea Jenkins."

Councilwoman Koch archly asked, "Why don't we name it after the mayor of New York?" Heartfelt laughter all around.

Mr. Barber reported a constituent's call urging that the street be named for James Lassiter, a black dentist who died at the peak of his productive life. Mrs. Rolio added the name of Judge Costanzo as worthy of memorialization. Mr. Flanagan, who believes, if we take him at his word, that Morristown residence is the prerequisite for everything from polite mention to police jobs, objected that the judge did not practice for the town; Mrs. Rolio pointed out that he was born and raised here.

In recapitulating, the Council President provided *Lassiter* with the

generic *road*. Someone recommended changing to *lane* for the sake of alliteration. She asked for a generic to match *Cresitello*; *court* was offered. Councilman Cresitello said, "I don't particularly care for that." Mrs. Rolio and Mr. Barber noted that we have no *Main Street* in town; Mr. Flanagan pointed out the shortness of the new street, as a counterindication. Mrs. Montgomery spoke briefly in favor of *Water Street*, because "that was *the* street, and that kind of puts it back on the map."

A procedural discussion followed. It was proposed that the Town Clerk pull one of these names out of a hat. Mr. Chambers suggested a motion, in view of the apparent consensus. Miss Koch moved for *Water Street*; Mrs. Rolio seconded. Mr. Cresitello asked about the historical significance of the name. "Lots of water in that area," said Miss Koch. "Somebody said something about the first settlement," he said. "Down at the bottom of the hill," said Mrs. Rolio. There followed a discussion of various streets in town that had been closed, moved, or renamed. An air of cooperation filled the room. On the vote, the only nay came from Mr. Cresitello; it is not clear why—he had no suggestion of his own, and did not want the street named after him. Applause followed the vote. Mrs. Montgomery said, with emphasis and relief, "How many years did that take?"

What does this fable teach us about the process of street-naming? For one thing, it confirms some of our beliefs. People seem to have, however vaguely, a notion of the way street generics relate to reality: this was a short street, and so it should be a *place*, a *way*, a *court*, a *terrace*, a *drive*, or a *street*, but not a *road* or an *avenue*. They also seem to have a standard set of categories that they believe are appropriate for street names, particularly for streets in the center of town, and will reuse these names rather than go outside of the set. And finally, we have a list of thirteen suggestions: nine of them commemorate people, and eight of those people are, or were, local and contemporary rather than historical. (So much for complaints about children naming their grandfathers.) So what we know is what we knew all along: that streets are another way we record our personal history on the world around us.

In his review of *What's in a Name?: An Essay in the Psychology of Reference*, Sam Glucksberg summarizes John Carroll's model for the naming process:

> First people describe a new referent ...; this description is then abbreviated,
> and this abbreviation then becomes the name. (653-54)

We have seen precisely such a process at work here, as "the new street" became *New Street*, and we have seen a cross-section of the process in motion as the record turned up "the road to Scott Hill" becoming the site of Evergreen Cemetery and then being named *Evergreen Avenue*.

This initial statement of the model rings true, but lacks completeness. *How* does abbreviation take place? We might answer that question linguistically, perhaps in terms of socially motivated deletion rules and the conservation of semantic content. And then it is merely a tautology to say that "the abbreviation *becomes* the name," because this "becoming" is exactly the subject of the model.

Naming is a cognitive function, and names are its linguistic expression. Streets are a neatly limited subset of the totality of named objects. They have many names but a common, statable purpose; there is an accessible body of documentation; and both they and their names originated within the bounds of recorded history. Thus the process of street naming is a particularly promising source of data from which broader generalizations might be derived.

<div align="right">

Bell Communications Research
Morristown, New Jersey

</div>

Notes

1. This information appears in a typescript at the Morristown-Morris Township Joint Free Public Library (local history department) of an address at the library in the 1930s to the B.P.W.C. [*sic*].

2. A note in the Morristown library vertical file "Morristown Roads" gives the 1909 date; the scrapbook of George W. Youngs (1860-1911) refers to an ordinance that resulted from a residents' petition for the name change, but gives no date.

3. See "Morristown's 'New' Street." The trouble with these portentous commemorative names is that they are too clumsy for everyday use, and so we abbreviate them to easy things like *FDR Drive, JFK Parkway*, or, in this case, just *"MLK,"* thus destroying the original respectful intent.

4. Pierson cites neighboring deeds to establish this date; Cobbett mentions a Morris County court order.

5. Mr. Chambers very kindly made available to me the audiotape of this meeting, which I attended as well.

Works Cited

Beers, F.W. *Atlas of Morris Co., N.J., from Actual Surveys.* ... New York: Beers, Ellis & Soule, 1868.

Boonton, Boonton Township, East Hanover, Hanover, Montville, Morris Plains, Morris Township, Morristown, Mountain Lakes, Parsippany-Troy Hills. Tele-pages maps. New York: Hagstrom Company, 1981.

Chambers, William. Personal communication. Oct. 1986.

The Charter of Morristown ... with the By-Laws and Ordinances. Revised. Morristown: Common Council, 1876.

Cobbett, Frederick B. "More About Early History of Speedwell by Cobbett." *Morristown Daily Record* 4 Dec. 1948: 10.

Glucksberg, Sam, "Watch'macallit?" Rev. of *What's in a Name?: An Essay in the Psychology of Reference,* by John M. Carroll (New York: Freeman, 1985). *Contemporary Psychology* 31 (1986): 653-54.

"Morristown's 'New' Street." *Morristown Daily Record* 25 March 1970.

"Ordinance to vacate, abandon, release and extinguish public rights in Water Street in the Town of Morristown. . ." 25 January 1971.

Pierson, Aldus H. "Speedwell Avenue is not Oldest of Main Arteries." *Morristown Daily Record* 8 Feb. 1941, 12.

A Plan of the Town Spot of Morristown in Morris County, New Jersey, for a Distance of Three Miles from the Court House, 1776-1781. Published for the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration, 22 Feb. 1932.

Rolio, Mary B. Personal communication. Oct. 1986.

Town of Morristown, Morris County, NJ. Official Zoning Map. Morristown: Planning Board, 11 Aug. 1969.

"Rest in Peace, Water Street." *Morristown Daily Record.* 2 Feb. 1971: 4.

*****

Confiscation of the Past

When Tomas looked back at the hotel, he noticed that something had in fact changed. What had once been the Grand now bore the name Baikal. He looked at the street sign on the corner of the building: Moscow Square. Then they took a walk (Karenin tagged along on his own, without a leash) through all the streets they had known, and examined all their names: Stalingrad Street, Leningrad Street, Rostov Street, Novosibirsk Street, Kiev Street, Odessa Street. There was a Tchaikovsky Sanatorium, a Tolstoy Sanatorium, a Rimsky-Korsakov Sanatorium; there was a Hotel Suvorov, a Gorky Cinema, and a Café Pushkin. All the names were taken from Russian geography, from Russian history.

Tereza suddenly recalled the first days of the invasion. People in every city and town had pulled down the street signs; sign posts had disappeared. Overnight, the country had become nameless. For seven days, Russian troops wandered the countryside, not knowing where they were. The officers searched for newspaper offices, for television and radio stations to occupy, but could not find them. Whenever they asked, they would get either a shrug of the shoulders or false names and directions.

Hindsight now made that anonymity seem quite dangerous to the country. The streets and buildings could no longer return to their original names. As a result, a Czech spa had suddenly metamorphosed into a miniature imaginary Russia, and the past that Tereza had gone there to find had turned out to be confiscated. (165–66)

*****