

## The U.S. Board on Geographic Names: An Overview

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### Abstract

This issue of *Names* commemorates the one hundredth anniversary of the Board on Geographic Names. From its informal beginning until the present, the Board has played an important role in standardizing the placenames of the United States.

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Geographic names have been formally studied in the United States at least since Egbert Benson presented his treatise on the subject in 1816. Although the main focus in the past has been the study of individual names, there is increasing interest in the dynamics of name creation and name use, factors that can shed light on a variety of cultural phenomena.

One area of interest regarding the use of geographic names is the relationship between the spoken and written word. We can write a spoken word and we can speak a written word, but the two acts do not relate equally with each other. Different communication systems are involved, each having different cognitive characteristics. A significant condition when dealing with written forms of names is the need for uniformity in the visual symbol for accurate communication. Variation in spelling or word form, however slight, can lead to confusion or misunderstanding. Unlike names used in speech, written names often are used alone outside the context of sentence structure. Geographic names used on charts, maps, and official documents, for example, need to be written in recognizable standard forms for effective meaning.

The United States appears to have led the way by officially dealing with the matter of geographic name standardization. On September 4, 1890, President Benjamin Harrison issued an executive order formally establishing the United States Board on Geographic Names. This small body of government officials was given the mission of solving geographic name problems found on official maps and other publications. This issue

of *Names* is dedicated to that organization on its centennial anniversary. Two of the articles in this issue describe the nature of geographic name standardization programs in the United States (especially with regard to foreign names) and Canada. Another deals with the highly sensitive issue of how the geographic names of minority cultures are treated in a number of countries and how political considerations enter into the standardization process. The remaining two articles illustrate how geographers use geographic names in geographic ways in order to learn temporal and spatial patterns of American practices and attitudes.

Because this issue is dedicated to the Board on Geographic Names, it seems appropriate to say something about the organization once described as an obscure organization in a large government.

In a sense, the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867 resulted in the eventual organization of the Board twenty-three years later. This purchase, along with the burst of exploration of western territories in the 1870s, created a situation where the accuracy of geographic names and their orthographies became a constant problem to Government scientists, chart-makers, and mapmakers.

The problem was so serious that during the winter of 1889-90, two men got together and decided to do something about the matter. Thomas C. Mendenhall, Superintendent, U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, and Lt. Richardson Clover, Hydrographer to the U.S. Navy, agreed to standardize the names used on the charts of their two agencies. Mendenhall had held the chair of physics at Ohio State University and the Imperial University in Japan before working for the Government, and Clover, who later became a rear admiral, spent his early naval career directing Alaska coastal surveys. These two men were especially concerned about the Alaska charts where hardly a name did not admit three or more spellings and many features had more than one name. They soon took the idea a step further. It was realized that the standardization effort would be more effective if other Federal agencies joined the agreement. On March 18, 1890, a group of Government scientists representing the Smithsonian Institution, the Light House Board, the Geological Survey, and the Army Corps of Engineers met with Clover and Mendenhall and organized an informal body under the title *United States Board on Geographic Names*. The course was set. Between the March meeting date and the September presidential order, these men developed a philosophy and basic principles which set the tone for a national program to standardize geographic names.



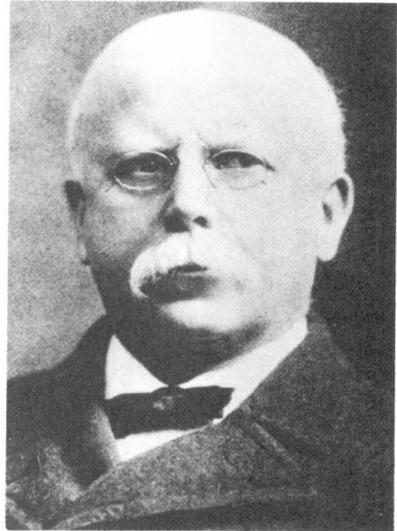
United States Geographic Board, April 2, 1913

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|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| William McNeir<br>State           | Fred G. Plummer<br>Agriculture      | Charles W. Stewart<br>Navy       | John S. Mills<br>Treasury | C. Hart Merriam<br>Agriculture | Frank Bond<br>Interior        |
| Frederick W. Hodge<br>Smithsonian | Harry W. Zeigler<br>Printing Office | David M. Hildreth<br>Post Office | George F. Cooper<br>Navy  | Henry Gannett<br>Interior      | Charles S. Sloane<br>Commerce |
| George R. Putnam<br>Commerce      | John E. McMahon<br>War              | Andrew Braid<br>Commerce         |                           |                                |                               |

All Photographs courtesy U.S. Board on Geographic Names



Richardson Clover (1846-1919)  
Original member and first executive  
secretary (1890-1893)



Thomas C. Mendenhall (1841-1924)  
Original member and first chairman  
(1890-1894)



Henry Gannett (1846-1914)  
Original member and second chairman  
(1894-1914)



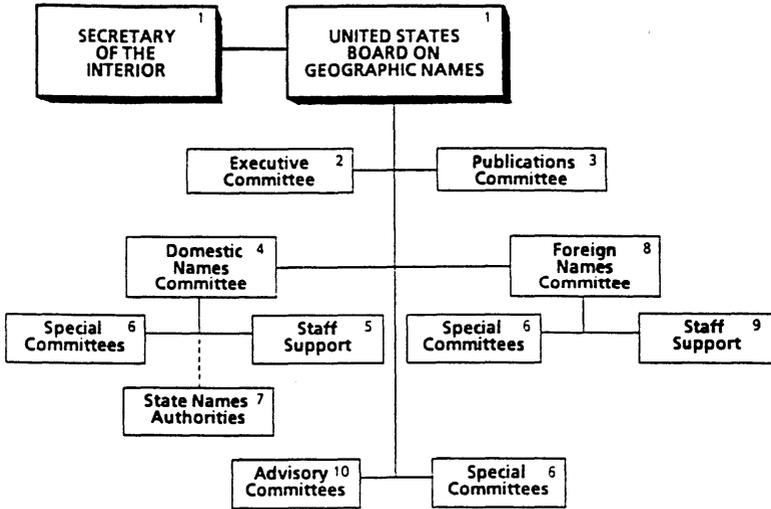
Meredith F. Burrill (1902- )  
Executive secretary (1943-1973)

The Board came into being at a time when there was a surge of creativity and interest in the sciences in our national capital. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Washington, D.C., witnessed a renaissance of academia in a political environment. The Board's first official members were part of that intellectual community. They were a physicist, an explorer, a geographer, an anthropologist/linguist, an historian, two military officers, and a political appointee. As leaders and no-nonsense men, they took a pragmatic approach to a problem. Although each had a full-time position of considerable importance, no effort was spared in focusing their collective knowledge and experience on the standardization effort. Meredith F. Burrill has said that the clarity of their perception of the basic questions and the foresight evidenced by the principles of standardization laid down are deserving of admiration. The soundness of these principles arose from a foundation not only in observed trends of placename evolution, but also in their practical experience with map and chart compilation and use, and the writing or transmission of names.

During its one-hundred-year history, the Board has experienced a number of directional and organizational changes. In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt extended and added to the Board's responsibilities. No longer did it only adjudicate conflicts, but it now had authority to standardize all geographic names for Federal Government use, including name changes and new names. It was also given the responsibility to standardize symbols used on official maps and charts. To reflect the expanded mission, the name of the organization was changed to the *United States Geographic Board*. In 1919, its map coordination activities were transferred to the newly established Board of Surveys and Maps. The name, however, was kept until 1934 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt reorganized and administratively transferred Board activities to the Department of the Interior. Between 1934 and 1947, the organization was formally called *United States Board on Geographical Names*.

The current period in the Board's history began in 1947 when the Congress of the United States reorganized the Board by Public Law. It now managed to recover its original name. The law directed the Board on Geographic Names, conjointly with the Secretary of the Interior, to establish and maintain uniform geographic-name usage throughout the Federal Government. The present organization operates without a budget and is made up of members and deputies from federal departments and independent agencies, providing a broad spectrum of repre-

**U. S. BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES  
ORGANIZATION**



1. *The Board on Geographic Names works conjointly with the Secretary of the Interior by Public Law 80-242 (1947) in order to achieve uniform geographic name usage throughout the Federal Government. Board officers are the Chairman, Vice Chairman, Executive Secretary to the Board, Executive Secretary for Domestic Names, and Executive Secretary for Foreign Names. The Board consists of members and deputies representing the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Interior, and State, and the Library of Congress, Government Printing Office, Central Intelligence Agency, and the Postal Service.*

sensation from most federal programs concerned with the use of geographic names. All members and deputies are employees of the Federal Government and serve without further compensation. Members and deputies are appointed by the heads of their respective departments or agencies for a two-year term. The Chairman is appointed by the Secretary of the Interior on nomination by the Board. Officers are a chairman, a vice chairman, and two executive secretaries. The Chairman appoints as Executive Secretary to the Board either the Executive Secretary for Domestic Names or the Executive Secretary for Foreign Names.

2. The *Executive Committee* is a standing committee consisting of the Board's Chairman, Vice Chairman, and Chairmen of the Domestic and Foreign Names Committees and Publications Committee.
3. The *Publications Committee* is a standing committee consisting of Board members representing the Government Printing Office and the Departments of Interior and Defense. Additional members may be appointed.
4. The *Domestic Names Committee* is a standing committee consisting of Board members and deputies representing the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, and Interior, and the Government Printing Office, Library of Congress, and Postal Service. The Committee meets monthly.
5. The *Executive Secretary for Domestic Names* and the Domestic Names Committee's *support staff* are provided by the U.S. Geological Survey (Interior).
6. Special committees dealing with specific problems or missions are established by the Board and its standing committees when needed.
7. The Domestic Names Committee works closely with *38 State names authorities and cooperators*.
8. The *Foreign Names Committee* is a standing committee consisting of Board members and deputies representing the Departments of Defense and State, the Central Intelligence Agency, and Library of Congress. The Committee works with foreign names authorities and the United Nations on standardization policies and foreign gazetteer production.
9. The *Executive Secretary for Foreign Names*, currently the Executive Secretary to the Board, and the Foreign Names Committee's *support staff* are provided by the Defense Mapping Agency (Defense).
10. Current *advisory committees* of the Board are the Advisory Committee on Undersea Features and the Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names. All staff support is currently provided by the Foreign Names Committee. Members of advisory committees are Federal employees who are expert in the subject of concern to each committee.

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Special working committees are established when necessary, and the Secretary of the Interior, upon recommendation of the Board, may establish advisory committees of recognized experts to assist in the solution or treatment of special problems. Current working committees include the Domestic Names Committee, Foreign Names Committee, Executive Committee, Publications Committee, and advisory committees on names of Native American origin and Antarctic and undersea feature names.

The Board on Geographic Names was once described as the oldest language control organization in the United States. While there is little

doubt that its policies and decisions have in some small way influenced the choice and spelling of geographic names used by all Americans, this description seems somewhat extravagant, although it may find support among those who find cause to disagree with the Board's policies and decisions. During the long period of toponymic stewardship, the Board has been praised, ridiculed, and ignored. It has locked horns with presidents, cabinet officers, congressmen, special interest groups, and persevering individuals (see, for example, my 1985 article in *Names*). There have been victories and some defeats. Throughout it all, its work has given the United States a uniform and noncontroversial system of geographic nomenclature that equals that of any other country in the world.

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