

The Roots and Development of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

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Abstract

The Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names traces its roots to a recommendation of land surveyors in 1888 and action by the federal government in 1897 to create the Geographic Board of Canada. Advisory committees have assisted the CPCGN with principles and procedures, undersea feature naming, alpine nomenclature, and toponymic research. The Committee has convened workshops on gazetteer production, language issues, data automation, and native names. It will continue to pursue field collection of toponyms and development of principles for standardizing toponyms and linking automated toponymic data bases.

Geographic Board of Canada (GBC)

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many surveyors, geographers, geologists, and mapmakers recognized the need for a single authority to which questions of geographical nomenclature and orthography could be referred for advice and decision. Errors and inconsistencies in the spelling and application of geographical names could in this way be avoided.

Names in the Yukon River basin, especially those given by Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka during an American military reconnaissance in 1883, were discussed at the 1888 annual meeting of the Dominion Land Surveyors Association and were judged to be inappropriate to the Canadian landscape (*Report*). Following this meeting, the officers of the association were tasked with preparing rules on geographical nomenclature and orthography in Canada to guide surveyors and government mapmakers.

The association recommended to the Minister of the Interior that:

- a dictionary of geographical names for Canada be compiled, under the direction of the Surveyor-General, to become an official reference;

- duplication of names be avoided;
- new names be submitted to the Surveyor-General, who would coordinate name approvals; and
- the Surveyor-General issue instructions to guide explorers wishing to identify geographical features.¹

In 1890 a position was set up in the Department of the Interior to compile lists of names in use and to establish uniformity in the treatment of names in all government publications. Surveyors and explorers were invited to correct spellings, suggest changes for duplicated names whenever possible, and collect relevant information associated with each name.

In 1892 the Minister of the Interior was advised by the Surveyor-General to create a “Board on Geographical Nomenclature,” and to appoint members from five federal departments involved in naming. However, it was not until five years later, when it was found that the United States Board was making decisions on names within Canadian territory, that an order in council of December 18, 1897, approved the establishment of the *Geographic Board of Canada*.

The first board comprised a chairman (F. Gourdeau, Deputy Minister of Marine and Fisheries), six members from different departments,² and a secretary (A. H. Whitcher, Department of the Interior). The Privy Council directed all departments to accept and use the names adopted by the Board. Very quickly, Rules of Nomenclature were drawn up and the Royal Geographical Society rules of orthography were adopted.

After a year of operation, the Board realized that participation by the provinces was desirable. In December 1899, the order in council was amended to give each of the provinces and the North-West Territories (then embracing the western prairies as well as northern Canada) the right to appoint members on the condition that their governments accept the decisions of the Board.

The province of Quebec chose not to appoint a member, but participated in providing appropriate names and orthography to the Board’s secretary. In 1929 the provinces were assured that each of their members had equal representation with the Ottawa members, but they often took considerable umbrage when the Ottawa-based executive committee changed or amended recommendations submitted to Ottawa. As early as 1933, the chairman of the Board suggested that the provinces might take on the responsibility of approving names, with the Board in Ottawa authorizing names in the two territories and advising federal depart-

ments on name decisions and policies. But it would not be until 1960 that a federal order in council would recognize the authority of the provinces within their own jurisdictions. With this action, all provinces, including Quebec, would designate members to sit on the national board to recommend on policies and agree on common principles.

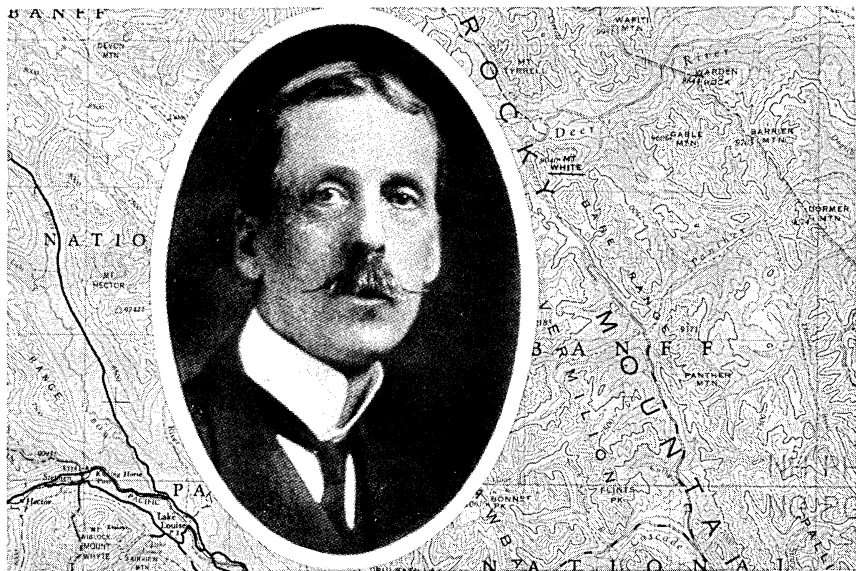
In 1900 the Board published the first of nineteen reports over a twenty-seven-year period. Some of the reports, such as the ninth, published in 1910, provided brief notes on the origin of each approved name, and on alternative names or spellings not found acceptable. The eighteenth report, published in 1924, was a cumulative list of all decisions made by the Board from its inception in 1897 to 1924.

In 1905 James White, then Chief Geographer of Canada, sent a circular letter to all postmasters across the country seeking information on the origin of the names of their communities. The responses provide a valuable body of knowledge on some 3,000 places in existence at the turn of the century. These replies are still in the records of today's Secretariat, and many have been discussed in issues of the journal *CANOMA* during the late 1970s and 1980s.

While a member of the Board from 1898 to 1928, James White wrote several name studies, including reports on the names of the Thousand Islands, of Quebec, and of Northern Canada. Robert Douglas, the Board secretary from 1916 to 1930, also produced name studies (for Prince Edward Island, Alberta, Manitoba, Îles de la Madeleine, and Canadian cities), and regularly wrote articles on geographical names for *Natural Resources Canada*, the Department of the Interior's monthly newspaper.

During its first thirty years the Board collected a large number of historical maps relating to Canada and used the nomenclature on them to guide the members in their decisions. When such evidence did not agree with current usage, the public often became considerably agitated with Board decisions, such as the change of *Tuktoyaktuk* (Northwest Territories) to *Fort Brabant* in 1939 and of *Castle Mountain* (Alberta) to *Mount Eisenhower* in 1946. (*Tuktoyaktuk* was restored in 1956 and *Castle Mountain* in 1979.)

In 1930 all the Board's routine duties were assigned to a clerk in the Surveys and Mapping Branch. The secretary was able to undertake only limited duties related to preparing lists of names for review by the executive committee prior to inclusion on federal maps, to communicating with the provincial and federal members, and to filing cards of decisions made. This arrangement continued through the years of World



James White (1863-1928), member of the GBC from 1898, elected chairman in 1927. Photomontage courtesy CPCGN.

War II, until changes in the structure of the office supporting the Board were made in 1947.

Canadian Board on Geographical Names (CBGN)

At the instigation of the Surveyor-General, a new order in council was passed in 1947 to provide the Board with staff and a budget to cover publication of reports.

The following year, after the establishment of the Geographic Bureau to undertake the professional study of the geography of Canada, the Geographic Board was instructed to find a new name for itself. As a result, the Board was renamed the *Canadian Board on Geographical Names*. With a larger staff, the new Board was able to address a huge backlog of names lists for new topographic maps and marine charts, and in 1952 to initiate the *Gazetteer of Canada* series.

The GBC had approved a set of principles for the handling of geographical nomenclature in 1898. In 1955 the CBGN undertook a complete revision of the principles, spelling out the duties and responsibilities of the Board, of its three-member executive committee, and of the secretary.

Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (CPCGN)

The Board was reorganized in 1961 as the *Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names*. On the recommendation of the Prime Minister, the appropriate federal or provincial minister was given authority to decide on names within his jurisdiction. All provinces participated. Responsibility for the two territories remained with the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development until 1984, when authority for naming in the Yukon Territory and the Northwest Territories was moved to the respective territorial governments. The Dominion Hydrographer joined the Committee in 1974, and the Geological Survey of Canada and Statistics Canada joined in the 1980s.

In 1964 a number of changes in the order in council were authorized, including the elimination of the executive committee, which had lost its function with the transfer of decision making to various provincial and federal ministers. The Chief of the Toponymy Division in the Geographical Branch (successor of the Geographic Bureau) was appointed Executive Secretary of the Committee.

In 1969 the order in council was once more revised, to allow mapmakers to translate generic terminology from French to English without being in conflict with the Board's regulations. The head of nomenclature in the Surveys and Mapping Branch was appointed Chief of Toponymy, and in that capacity was made responsible for the Committee's Secretariat, the Branch's nomenclature unit, the Branch's book library and the Departmental map library. In 1970 it was recommended that funds needed for the Committee's work be separately identified and justified.

During the mid 1970s a new set of principles and procedures was passed by the Committee, reflecting changes in thinking about the treatment of names and terminology. Another complete revision was undertaken in 1987, as a result of changing attitudes and perceptions, in particular concerning respect for local usage, translation, spelling, and name duplication. Each of the principles is now accompanied by comments and examples to clarify its meaning, and to explain some of the problems and pitfalls of naming practices (Canadian Permanent Committee).

In 1975 the Secretariat launched *CANOMA*, a twice-yearly journal dedicated to news and views on Canadian toponymy. The journal, now having completed its fifteenth year, is the only publication of this sort in the world devoted entirely to a country's toponymy.

In 1978 the Surveys and Mapping Branch established the Committee's Secretariat as a separate component of its Geographical Services Division and created the position of Executive Secretary, thus restoring the distinct position dropped about 1931. The functions of the reorganized Secretariat were designed to relate to policy development and communications with the public, while responsibility for field work, gazetteer production, maintenance of an automated toponymic data base, and names compilation for the Branch's maps were vested in a reorganized Toponymy Division within the Geographical Services Division.

The geographical names records for Canada had long existed as a centralized card system in Ottawa. At the close of the 1970s, however, the records of the CPCGN were automated as the National Toponymic Data Base (NTDB) to allow manipulation of names data for mapping, gazetteers, and associated reference purposes. The importance of gazetteer listings for disseminating information on official geographical names, to show correct spellings and coordinate references, had long been seen as an important phase of the decision-making process. The GBC had produced its annual lists and its specialized name studies. In 1952, however, the publication of the *Gazetteer of Canada: Southwestern Ontario* constituted the first volume of what was to become the Gazetteer of Canada series. The gazetteer is now produced in separate provincial or territorial volumes for the CPCGN by the federal Department of Energy, Mines and Resources (EMR). Currently data for the series are compiled from the automated NTDB, which now contains some 500,000 records. Each gazetteer volume, in addition to an alphabetical list of official names, contains reference maps and a glossary of generic terms relevant to the region. To date, the Commission de toponymie du Québec has produced its own gazetteers of toponyms of Quebec (in 1969, 1980, and 1987).³ The *Gazetteer Atlas of Canada*, using census data from 1976, was published by EMR in 1980, and, with its index of 34,000 names, constitutes the only "concise national gazetteer" of Canada.

The 1980s were marked by significant discussions on the role and functions of the Committee and on the need for the Committee to exercise more vigorously its advisory role for the development of toponymic policies and procedures. The Committee sponsored a number of useful seminars, symposia, and workshops on matters relating to the language of geographical names, to gazetteer production, to the automation of toponymic records, and to the treatment of native geographical names.

In the early 1980s, considerable pressure was exerted at the federal level in Canada to have both English and French forms of names officially recognized for federal maps and documents. Lengthy discussions with the Official Languages Branch of Treasury Board led to endorsement by the CPCGN of approximately eighty "pan-Canadian" names that would have recognized English and French forms for use on federal *maps*. From the Treasury Board's Circular 1983-58, the Translation Bureau of the Department of Secretary of State developed guidelines for the use of geographical names in English and French *texts*, whereby names of populated places remain as approved, while those for physical features may have their generic terms translated into the other official language.

By the end of the 1980s, the hardware and software capabilities of the NTDB had been upgraded and several provincial jurisdictions had their own automated geographical names data bases. In northern Canada, some of the names long familiar to map users had been changed: *Frobisher Bay* became *Iqaluit*, and *Eskimo Point* became *Arviat*. In both cases, recognition has been given to the names used by the local Inuit population. Similarly, names used by the native Indian population of Canada were being recorded and approved by the CPCGN—*Gitwinksihlkw* in British Columbia, *Was-kaganish* in Quebec, and *Sheshatsheits* in Newfoundland—to indicate but a few. Cooperation with the United States Board on Geographic Names had existed over many decades. However, it was not until 1989, after several years of discussion, that a formal document of understanding was signed between Canada and the United States relating to the treatment of names of transboundary features.

The CPCGN has formed several advisory committees to address in more detail some areas of interest and concern to its members. Three such committees currently have ongoing responsibilities for undersea feature names, glaciological nomenclature, and toponymy research.

- * In 1967, the Dominion Hydrographer recommended the creation of an advisory committee on the handling of undersea feature names within maritime areas of interest to Canada. The committee was set up under the Dominion Hydrographer's direction. In the past twenty years it has endorsed some 4,000 names for use on marine charts and has produced two editions—the latest in 1987—of a *Gazetteer of Undersea Feature Names* from automated records maintained by the office of the Dominion Hydrographer.

- * In 1975, the need for a specialized group to develop guidelines for the handling of names relating to permanent ice features and alpine regions was acknowledged by the establishment of the Advisory Committee on Glaciological and Alpine Nomenclature. The members of the advisory committee found during initial studies that there was a considerable variation of opinion about the meaning and application of generic terminology relating to glacial and mountainous features. Ultimately, the Advisory Committee, in concert with the Translation Bureau of the Department of Secretary of State, produced, in 1987, Terminology Bulletin 176, *Glossary of Generic Terms in Canada's Geographical Names*. Each of some 600 terms as used in official names in Canada is described in both English and French and is accompanied with observations on its use and occurrence, with notes on equivalent terms in the other language and on related terms in the same language. As well, examples are provided of the actual use of each term in selected Canadian names. Early in 1990, the CPCGN published two pamphlets to assist the general public in preparing name proposals for submission to CPCGN members. The texts of *Naming Canada's Geographical Features* and *La dénomination des entités géographiques du Canada* were largely the work of of this Advisory Committee.
- * The Advisory Committee of Toponymy Research was also organized in 1975 to advise the Permanent Committee on matters relating to research activities. The Advisory Committee has played a strong role in promoting workshops on gazetteer production, automated data base development, and appropriate recognition of native names, and in the treatment of transboundary names. It has also pursued with diligence a clearer statement of the functions and responsibility of the CPCGN and its Secretariat.

The CPCGN has exercised a prominent role in the development of international policies and principles for the standardization of geographical names. Not only has the Committee participated actively in the five con-

ferences convened by the United Nations since 1967, it has provided a number of specialists in the name field to take part in the sessions of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. Following each international conference—the most recent of which was hosted by Canada, in Montréal in 1987—the Committee has published the technical papers submitted by the various names jurisdictions within Canada, along with the resolutions passed at each conference. In 1988 the CPCGN, through the Commission de toponymie du Québec, offered a training course in Quebec in French for developing countries. The Commission subsequently published the papers presented at the course.

The year 1990 heralds new challenges for the CPCGN. A new order in council (in place since March) more appropriately recognizes the decision-making responsibilities of the provinces and the territories within the coordinating framework of the CPCGN. The technical role of a national names authority is to gather accurate names data, to make official appropriate name records which can be available for maps, texts, signs, etc. Increasingly the cultural role of a national names authority has been recognized in Canada with the responsibility of the CPCGN to record and preserve the ethnocultural heritage of the country as expressed in the naming of places and features of the landscape and seascape.

As the CPCGN moved into the 1990s, it has reviewed its mission, responsibilities, and goals in developing a strategic plan. Quite clearly, the thrust of toponymy in Canada in this new decade will be to achieve at least a basic field coverage of names collection across the country, to develop suitable names policies and procedures in order to recognize standard versions of geographical names, and to continue the development and availability of automated toponymic data for Canada. With these goals must go the fourth—the dissemination of accurate official names information to government and the private sector, both inside and outside Canada.

The year 1990 marks the 100th anniversary of the first steps by the Government of Canada to standardize the use and spelling of geographical names in the country. The Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names continues to have an essential function in ensuring the proper treatment of the country's geographical names and in developing policies and procedures to protect Canada's toponymic heritage.

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Notes

1. These recommendations are reproduced in full in *First Annual Report*.
2. These departments were Marine and Fisheries, Queen's Printer, Interior, Railways and Canals, Post Office, and Geological Survey.
3. The most recent of these gazetteers is listed in Commission de toponomie du Québec, *Répertoire*.

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