

Toponymic Generics, Environment, and Culture History in Pre-Independence Belize*

Robert E. Ford

Abstract

An analysis of 941 toponymic generics in Belize (formerly British Honduras) in terms of historical-cultural environmental development reveals that physical generic terms predominate (77%) over cultural ones (23%). Among the physical terms, landform generics (92%) far outweigh vegetation ones (8%), and fluvial terms (91%) far outnumber marine (9%) ones. These patterns reflect the dominant influence of extractive livelihoods (fishing, logging, farming, smuggling) in pre-independence Belize.

Introduction

The Central American country now known as Belize was called in earlier days "the settlement of Belize" or "the Bay Settlement," and the terms referred interchangeably to the town site and the entire territory. Although the earliest use of the name *Honduras* was in 1797, the region did not become officially known as "the Colony of British Honduras" until 1862 (Clegern 19). Belize achieved its independence from Great Britain in 1981.

The study of toponymic generics in Belize reveals much about past landscapes, and it chronicles the dynamic interaction between diverse ethnic groups and a new and often unpredictably challenging socio-political and physical environment. As Janet H. Gritzner points out, the changes seen in the toponymy of a region usually occur as a result of (a) borrowing from other cultures, (b) extending the meanings of certain old topographic terms brought by new settlers, (c) limiting the meaning of older topographic terms, and (d) creating new terms out of old material not previously used in a geographic sense (231-33). All of these processes are evident in Belize.

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The corpus of toponymic generics found on the topographic maps of Belize¹ prior to independence is particularly alluring because it reflects a long interaction between an extremely mobile and pluralistic society and what was for most of them a radically different physical environment from that found back home. Among the diversity of peoples found in Belize are Spanish, Indian, Asian, African, Garifuna, English, Dutch, French, Scottish, North American (Puritan, Confederate), Mennonite, Syrian, and mixed groups like the Creoles and Ladinos. Among the studies of the various ethnic groups inhabiting Belize and the "Mosquito Coast" (Rimland) region are those by David Carr and John Thorpe, Desmond Holdridge, Harry L. Sawatzky, Edward Conzemius, Arthur P. Newton, James J. Parsons, Douglas Taylor, and J. Eric Thompson.

Preservation of this toponymic knowledge is important, because, like many newly-independent Third World countries, Belize is experiencing radical changes that may sever contact with its past. Many fascinating and often whimsical names (and even significant historical terms) are rapidly being displaced on current maps by new ones; some remain for a time within the popular culture as part of the "folk" toponymy, but as the older generations die off many of these names will be permanently lost.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is two-fold: (a) to begin the process of preservation and reconstruction of the pre-independence toponymy and (b) to consider what this toponymy reveals about the culture as it has unfolded through the last four hundred years, especially the way its people perceived the physical environment and adjusted to it.

Background

Historical. The history of Belize is in many respects a microcosm of the whole Central American region, spanning periods that saw the rise and fall of vast pre-contact Mayan civilizations, the Colonial Period with its see-saw battle for dominance between the Spanish and British Empires, and the Late Colonial Period of British political control but American economic hegemony.

Subsequently, Belize experienced the slow evolution to political independence, first as part of a British Crown Colony and later alone. For most of the last forty years Belize has gone through this evolution while facing up to strong cultural and political challenges to its inde-

pendence, border security, and cultural uniqueness from Mexico and Ladino Guatemala.²

Physical-Environmental Backgrounds. The physical environment has had a great influence on the patterns of naming in Belize.³ Three distinct environmental zones can be delineated: (a) the undulating and low-lying north; (b) the hilly dissected plateau of the southern interior with its narrow coastal plain; and (c), about fifteen miles offshore, a submarine escarpment supporting the second longest barrier reef in the world. The inshore area behind this reef is very shallow, the result of sediment deposition from the many rivers emptying into it; many "mangrove swamp" cays are formed on the numerous inshore sandbars (Fig. 1).

Geologically much of the country's parent rock is of limestone origin, except for some intrusive granites and porphyries and other minor sandstone, quartzite, and slate outcrops; both of the latter are found in the southern hills and plateaus. The limestones produce many karst landform and hydrologic features throughout the country.

In terms of climate Belize falls within the "humid tropical" zone, but this generalization masks distinct local differences. The north is predominantly "dry tropical" and the south is very "wet" with the intervening areas having transitional climates. Both sub-regions have distinct dry seasons, which contributes to high risk of forest fire (Fig. 1).

Four principal vegetation formations are significant. Heavily forested areas, often of the gallery type, occur along the major rivers where rich alluvial soils are found. This forest is often indicated by the presence of the Cohune Palm (*Attalea cohune*) or *Coroza*, as it is known in Spanish. The name of the town Corozal comes from *Coroza* (Anderson 15-16). The park-like pine woodlands (*Pinus caribea*) growing on well-drained soils in the upland areas of the country make up the second type of vegetation. Third are the thickets of stunted trees and the pernicious "cutting-grass" (*Imperata* spp.), locally called "broken pine ridges," located on poorly drained, swampy soils. Fourth are the savannas or tropical grasslands which are occasionally interspersed with thickets of bamboo or palmetto.

The savannas are very poorly drained and during the wet season often become vast standing bodies of water. Local people often distinguish a variant of the dense forest which they call "bay leaf ridge"; it is conspicuous for the absence of the Cohune Palm and is dominated by the presence of hardwoods such as "baywood," a variety of mahogany or caoba which has a particularly fine, dense grain and is much sought after (Ower 373-74).

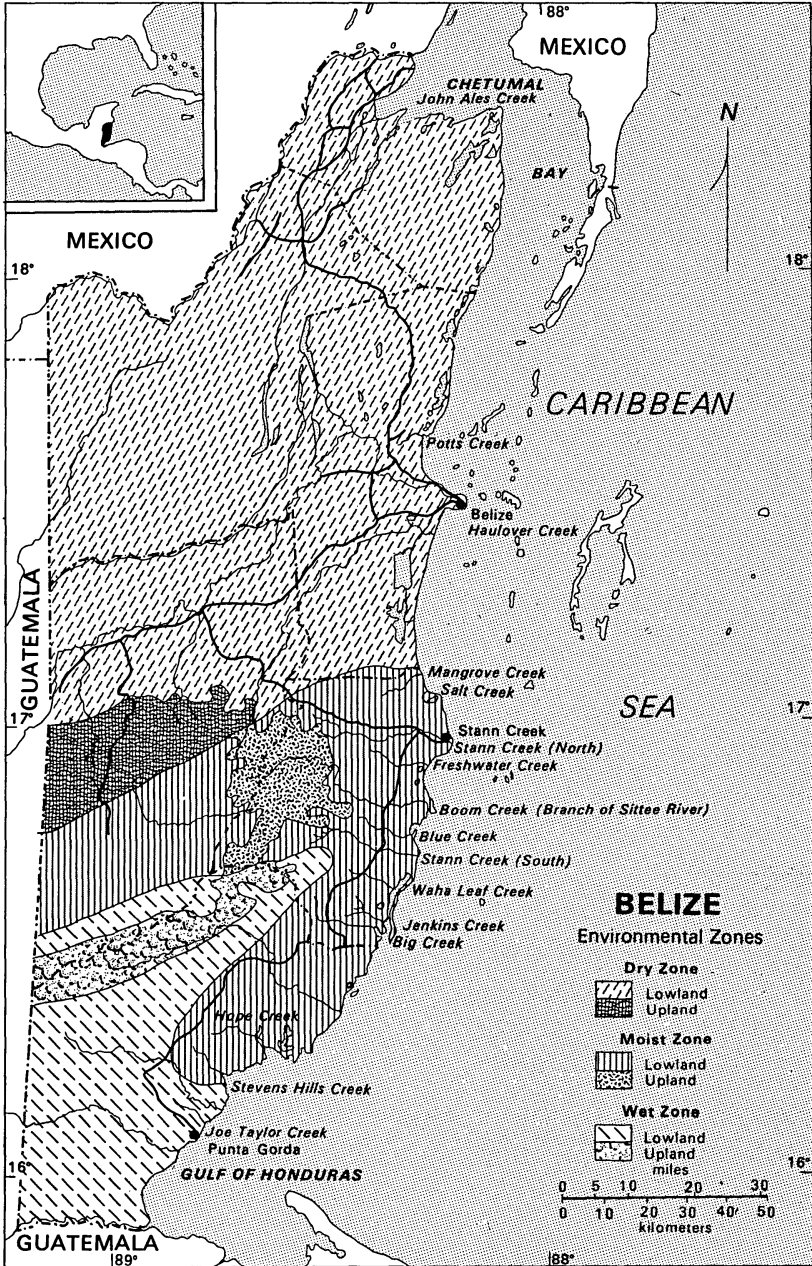


Fig. 1. Environmental zones of Belize. This map also shows streams with the generic creek which enter the sea along the Belize south coast.

Classification and Analysis of Placenames

Overview. Placename study distinguishes between generic terms, which serve as classifiers of landscape phenomena, and specifics, which are the individual site-specific terms. Specifics may sometimes have a generic or classifying function. In most cases a placename will consist of both elements, for example, *English Cay*—the first name is a specific and the last a generic classifier.

For this study, I have identified a total of 1,120 names, 941 of which I consider to have a generic function. Specific placename terms, including the genetic aspect (or historical origin), have been studied and will be covered in a subsequent article.

Analysis of Names. I divided the generic terms into hierarchical classes (Fig. 2), including two first-order classes (physical and cultural features); four sub-order ones (land and water vs. location and function); and four sub-sub-orders of the “physical” features, representing a third level of analysis.

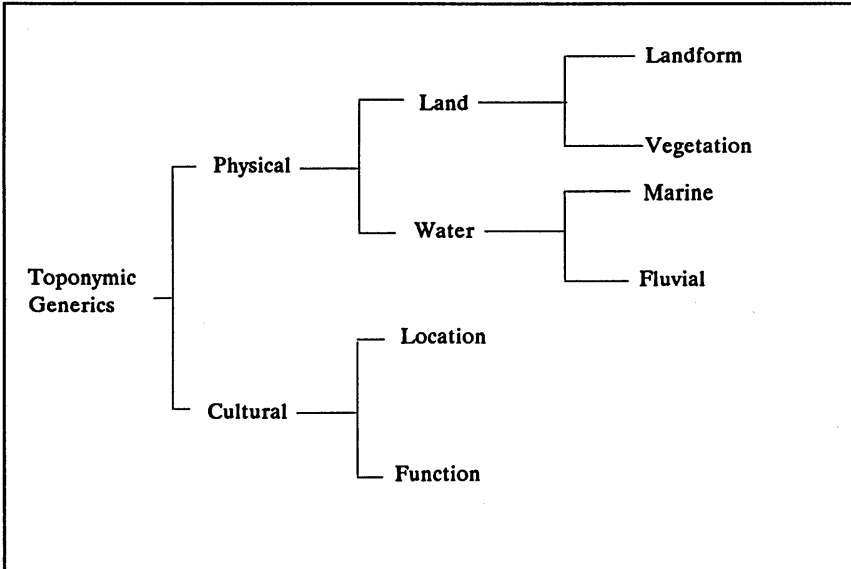


Fig. 2. Classification of toponymic generic placenames.

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Physical Features. Table 1 shows that “landform” terms are far more common (92%) than vegetation terms (8%). Table 2 lists the “physical-land” terms. Many names are transfers from Spanish or English origins; *Ben* (for mountain) is quite unusual in that it reflects a Scottish influence (Metzgen and Cain 44).

Table 1. Frequency distribution of toponymic generics in Belize.

| PHYSICAL FEATURES | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----|---------|-----------|-----|---------|
| Land | No. | Percent | Water | No. | Percent |
| Landform | 272 | 92 | Fluvial | 379 | 91 |
| Vegetation | 23 | 8 | Marine | 39 | 9 |
| Sub-total | 295 | 100 | Sub-total | 418 | 100 |
| | | | | No. | Percent |
| | | | LAND | 295 | 42 |
| | | | WATER | 418 | 58 |
| | | | Sub-total | 713 | 100 |
| CULTURAL FEATURES | | | | | |
| Location | No. | Percent | | | |
| Function | 83 | 36 | | | |
| Sub-total | 228 | 100 | | | |
| GRAND TOTALS | | | | | |
| | | | | No. | Percent |
| Physical | | | | 713 | 77 |
| Cultural | | | | 228 | 23 |
| Totals | | | | 941 | 100 |

The most common landform generic is *Cay* ‘island, islet,’ from Spanish *Cayo* ‘beach, sandbank, islet’ (Gregg 3). This generic appears in the name of one of Belize’s most historic places: St. George’s Cay, the site of a famous battle in 1798 between the Baymen and the Spanish, an

Table 2. Alphabetic listing of the "physical-land" toponymic generics of Belize with their frequency of usage.

| Landform Terms | Frequency | Vegetation Terms | Frequency |
|------------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| Bay | 1 | Campo | 1 |
| Beach | 1 | Cohune Ridge (corozal) | 4 |
| Ben | 1 | Pine ridge | 11 |
| Bight | 10 | Savanna | 5 |
| Bluff | 2 | Tree | <u>2</u> |
| Cave | 6 | | 23 |
| Cay | 147 | | |
| Cerritos | 1 | | |
| Cut | 1 | | |
| Drowned cays | 1 | | |
| Escarpment | 2 | | |
| Gap | 2 | | |
| Gorge | 2 | | |
| Haulover | 3 | | |
| Head | 1 | | |
| Hill | 23 | | |
| Island | 2 | | |
| Lomitas | 1 | | |
| Mount | 3 | | |
| Mountain | 3 | | |
| Peak | 2 | | |
| Point | 32 | | |
| Puente natural | 1 | | |
| Range (cay) | 7 | | |
| Range (highland) | 1 | | |
| Ridge (highland) | 5 | | |
| Rock | 3 | | |
| Sierra | 2 | | |
| Sierritas | 1 | | |
| Spit | 3 | | |
| Spot | 1 | | |
| Valley | <u>1</u> | | |
| | 272 | | |
| | | TOTALS: | |
| | | Landform = | 272 |
| | | Vegetation = | <u>23</u> |
| | | Physical Land | 295 |

event still seen as the "declaration of independence." The cay was earlier known to both the buccaneers and Spanish as *Cayo Cocinas*, *Casinas*, and other variants. It literally means "kitchen"; local sources attribute this name to the buccaneers' common practice of curing turtle meat on the cay. Some very early English maps in the Bancroft Library

(Berkeley) show the spelling as *Kay Kazine*, reflecting an anglicization of Cayo Cosinas (Anderson 58).

In Belize the meaning of the term *cay* has been extended to include even stranded bars in streams and river-front beaches. Local people have also created a new term, *range*, to cover a specific class of cays, for instance, the *Tobacco Range*; the generic refers to a tight compact cluster of mangrove cays separated from any other group by a broad expanse of water. *The Drowned Cays* (Fig. 3) on the other hand are less compact and are not considered to be a single unit (Vermeer 34).

From the geomorphic perspective, three kinds of “cays” are encountered offshore. Those nearest the coast result from deposition of

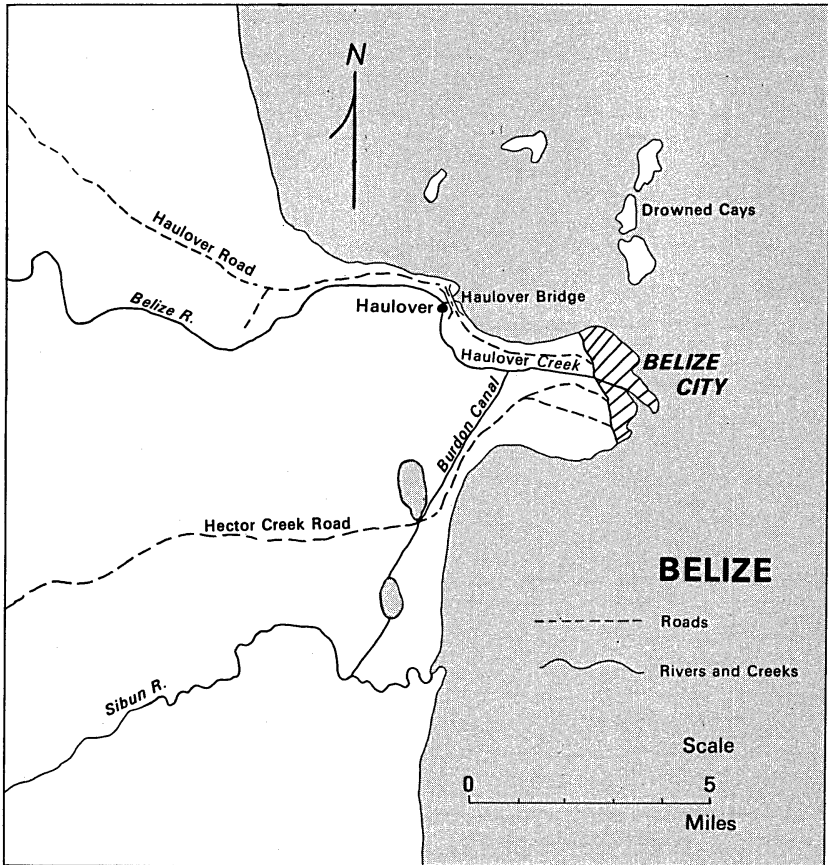


Fig. 3. Sketch of “haulover” on the Belize or Old River.

mud and silt close to major river mouths; these are called *ranges*. Second are those located on the ocean-facing side of the barrier reef. These cays are composed of shingle, called "pipeshank" in Belize, the sandy debris formed from the battering of coral atolls by open-sea waves. The third type of cay is transitional between the first two: the windward side may be composed of shingle and is usually covered with coconut trees, while the leeward side may have mangrove swamps because of significant deposition of silt and mud (Vermeer 36).

The most unusual landform generic in Belize is *haulover*, a term which has appeared on maps from the late eighteenth century. In the early days it was purely a generic, but today it has become a specific as well, for example, *Haulover Creek* (Fig. 3). Conzemius suggests that the term may have originated among those who observed the Miskito and Creole people hauling their dugout canoes from one body of water to another over narrow necks of land, for example, a natural levee or sandspit (171). Commanders Owen and Barnett⁴ corroborate this usage on their sailing chart of the Gracias a Dios Harbour.

E. O. Winzerling claims that the estuary and lower reaches of the Belize River was called *Texach* in Mayan times (57); the term translates as "ford, cross-road, or haulover." Stephen Caiger recounts how in early days log rafts were floated down river to "the haulover near the estuary or barquedier," where they were collected and sorted prior to export (47). A newspaper story in the *Honduras Gazette* (circa 1825) tells of a party of slaves being sent to repair and improve the surface of the "haulover" by building a log or corduroy ramp.

In earlier times a natural levee probably separated the main course of the Belize River from the meandering distributary now called *Haulover Creek*. It would be logical for a crossroad or "haulover" to be located there, as it would have allowed the Baymen free access to the Belize settlement without having to take the longer and more exposed coastal route (Fig. 3). Thus in recent times when the distributary was dredged and the levee eliminated, the name of this earlier "break in transportation" shifted to the creek itself. Even later, a bridge installed at this location was named *Haulover Bridge*.

Of the remaining landform generics, most are common throughout the English-speaking world. Yet the high frequency with which the terms *point* and *hill* are used deserve comment. In Belize, which is quite flat, headlands and hills would naturally "grab the eye" of the seaman; the same could be said of cays and bights (Tables 1 and 2). In the Buccaneer and later Baymen

periods, water navigation was the only feasible means of transportation. Thus salient landscape features observed from the platform of a ship deck or canoe would of necessity dominate perception.

One of these "points" is reminiscent of Belize's long involvement with pirates and buccaneers. Gallows Point, located on a barrier reef cay, recalls times when the British Navy attempted to suppress "buccaneering" (Swayne 166). The term *buccaneer* comes from the French *boucan* or *boucanier* meaning "to cure meat." The term originated from the Arawak word *barbacoa*, from which we also get the word *barbecue* (Burns 292-93).

The term *Baymen*, incidentally, probably came from the location of the first settlers at the Bay of Honduras, although some have suggested that the name came from *Baywood*, a local name for mahogany *caoba* (Morris 61; Quijano 35).

The vegetation generics of Belize, though minor in number, are significant in the sense that they mirror a certain folk ecological knowledge that is quite accurate ecologically. The term *ridge* exemplifies a process of redefining a generic brought from the settler's homeland. In Belize *ridge* no longer refers to interfluves alone but also to vegetation-soil complexes. It is not surprising therefore, due to the flatness of the landscape, that vegetation complexes (cohune, pine, or baywood) would be more salient than many interfluves. So, *ridge* has come to refer to linear vegetation features such as gallery forests. The term *sayanna* for tropical grasslands is here transferred faithfully.

Physical-Water Features. In Belize water features number high among the toponymic generics (Table 3). Note that they are further sub-divided into "fluvial" types, all stream-related phenomena, and "marine" types, those water features associated with the barrier reef.

Among the fluvial features we note several Spanish words, probably originating from the Mayan peoples of the extensive Yucatan karst region north of Corozal. *Cenote* translates as "deep underground reservoir of water." Other karst terms include *Resumadero* (a "rise" or resurgence), the opposite of a swallow-hole or disappearing stream. *Sotero* means "subterranean" in Spanish.

Zibal is rather unusual; it is often associated with sink-like lakes (possibly dolines) which lack any obvious surface connection to a stream. Incidentally, *Zibal* appears in the name of famous Lake Izabal (*Peten-itza*) in Guatemala. The *itza* in the latter term signifies "water" in the local

Table 3. The "physical-water" toponymic generics of Belize.

| Fluvial Terms | Frequency | Marine Terms | Frequency |
|---------------|-----------|--------------------|-----------|
| Branch | 27 | Bank | 1 |
| Cenote | 4 | Bar | 2 |
| Creek | 187 | Boca | 4 |
| Crique | 13 | Bogue | 6 |
| Eddy | 6 | Channel | 4 |
| Estero | 1 | Cut | 2 |
| Falls | 16 | Entrance | 5 |
| Hole | 2 | Hole | 4 |
| Lagoon | 56 | Reef | 5 |
| Lakes | 1 | Rocks | <u>6</u> |
| Mouth | 1 | | 39 |
| Pond | 4 | | |
| Querbrada | 3 | | |
| Rsumado | 1 | | |
| Rio | 12 | | |
| River | 20 | TOTALS: | |
| Run | 15 | Fluvial = 379 | |
| Source | 1 | Marine = <u>39</u> | |
| Stream | 2 | 418 | |
| Swamp | 4 | | |
| Zibal | <u>3</u> | | |
| | 379 | | |

Indian language (Burdon 26). The three features using the term *Itza/Zibal* are in sharp contrast to those called *lagoons*, which are back-swamps, resulting from the overflowing or slowing down of streams traversing the low-lying coastal floodplains; some of these "lagoons" open up directly to the sea (Winzerling 58; Metzgen and Cain 54; Asturias 13).

The name *Sibun*, of the river by that name, is supposedly a corruption of an earlier word *Xibun* (or *Xabon, Jabon*). The "ha" sound, Winzerling claims, originated from the Mayan word *Zibal*, discussed above. Coincidentally the names *Peten-Ha* and *Ca-Jabon* were both localities found in the lowlands of Guatemala and Honduras, a region formerly known as *Vera Paz* (Asturias 13). Both were near "lagoons" or *Zibal*-type water features.

Offshore on the barrier reef is found an extremely rare marine karst feature, a submerged doline named *Blue Hole*, located on Lighthouse Reef. This feature was formed during the Pleistocene epoch, when the whole coastal shelf was above water. As the ocean rose it left marks on

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the walls of the doline tracing the changing levels of the sea.⁵

Curiously, among the fluvial terms *pond* is used only four times, as compared to the fifty-six times for *lagoon*. Furthermore, the use of *pond* does not seem to correlate with a specific type of fluvial feature as do the others. Its use may be the result of direct transfer or whimsy.

On the other hand, the high occurrence of the term *creek* (187 times) suggests greater importance in Belize. *Criquet*, its Spanish-Indian corruption, is used thirteen times. Normally the Spanish term *quebrada* would be a more linguistically appropriate translation of *creek*; but *quebrada* is used only three times. In addition, most of the places where *criquet* occurs are located in the chicle-producing areas of the western and southern districts, which today have high concentrations of Lacandon and Ketchi peoples who immigrated to Belize in the 1860s.

Stream features called *creeks* in Belize are largely reserved for minor tributary streams not entering the sea; those larger streams entering the sea go by the generic *river* or the Spanish *rio*. Yet there is a significant exception to this generalization that bears a more detailed analysis. Figure 4 shows several streams called *creeks* entering the ocean. The largest concentration of them is in the Stann Creek Region. Winzerling attributes this regional concentration to a previous "occupation" of that coast by Dutch and Puritan traders who frequented the area prior to 1633. He claims it was their custom to name streams entering the ocean as *creeks*.⁶

The leader of this early colonizing venture supposedly was Captain Cammock, who is known to have led a party of Puritans to the island of Providence off the coast of Nicaragua. He and his Dutch cohorts, "the brothers Blauvelt," eventually left the Puritan settlement and set up smuggling operations along the Nicaraguan coast. Bluefields was founded by the Blauvelts as were other settlements such as Braggman's Bluff (today's Puerto Cabezas) and another settlement on the present Cape Gracias a Dios (Newton 1914; Floyd 17-18; Burns 204ff; Bard 337).

Smuggling was a major activity in the Gulf of Honduras during Spanish times. The main destination point was Guatemala via the Ulua and Usumacinta Rivers. Winzerling surmises that the Belize coast with its many cays and creeks would have been logical rendezvous points for clandestine smuggling activities. Many holdover placenames seem to support this hypothesis. For instance, *Commerce Bight*, just south of Stann Creek Town, is supposedly a corruption of Captain Cammock's name or title; early maps show the name spelled as *commess* or *commiss*. According to Winzerling, the local Miskito and Creole peoples called

the Captain "*commies*" from "commissar," the Dutch term for agent or manager (Winzerling 39; Carr and Thorpe 113–115; Caiger 29).

Another local corruption may also substantiate this hypothesis: the *Stann* in Stann Creek, according to several authors, is a corruption of the word *stand*, which was the name for an "open roadstead anchorage for ships." Presumably, *stand* was also applied to the "warehouse" or "trading post" located onshore adjacent to these anchorages. Throughout the region, particularly in the Bay Islands, a trading post or general store is often called a "commissary" (Gregg 54; Winzerling 38–40; Carr and Thorpe 113, 167; Parsons 3–16).

Other names along the south coast of Belize also reflect a Dutch and English Puritan occupation: *Queen Cay* is attributed to a brig named *Queen* commanded by Captain Cammock; *Cay Gloria*, *Plascencia* or *Patience Lagoon*, and *Jonathan Point* are also attributed to the Puritans. *Plascencia* as a name appears on even some of the earliest Spanish maps of the area. It should be understood, though, that authors like Winzerling, who went to great lengths to document English and Dutch occupation at such early dates, desired to "prove" that the Spanish never really controlled the region and that the non-Spanish people were the real occupants.

Another fluvial generic is *branch*. Its meaning is obvious, though in most English speaking areas *fork* or *tributary* might also be heard. Another unusual generic term is *source*, used to denote the headwaters of a stream, for example, *Sibun Source* in the Mountain Pine Ridge region of Belize. Other rare stream related terms are *hole* or *mouth* (for stream confluence) and Spanish *estero*, which would normally translate into English as *estuary*, but the place name carrying this generic is nowhere near an estuary. It is unclear whether this is an anomaly in naming, a corruption, or a change from its usual Anglo-Saxon meaning.

The fluvial generic terms *eddy*, *run*, and *falls* are common in Belize and all are related to the term *rapid* (Ower 373–74). That these "breaks in transportation" stand out in the toponymy is to be expected. Recall that a major livelihood of the Baymen—besides being seamen and traders or smugglers—was cutting mahogany and logwood, and we already know that river transport was crucial to all these occupations. Logwood was the main source of indigo, a blue dye important to the growing textile industry of England, Flanders, and other centers of the nascent Industrial Revolution in Europe. The name *Campeche*, common to the Gulf Coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, was an Indian name for "logwood" (Waddell 35).

In Belize the “marine” features are less significant than the “fluvial” ones. Note that most are actually underwater landforms but are perceived as “water” features because they are encountered while fishing or sailing. A most unusual term is *bogue*. In Belize it refers to “the channels separating the cays whether in the compact ‘range’ or more widely-spaced ‘drowned cays.’ And they are distinct in that they are maintained by tidal action” (Vermeer 35). *Bogue* is also used to designate small channels or entrances in the barrier reef (Metzgen 35).⁷

Bank in Belize has both a physical and cultural meaning: as a physical term it generally refers to intertidal and continental shelf zones or oceanic rises (Thornbury 447–48). Though some places called *banks* in Belize may fit the geomorphological definition, in folk use a *bank* refers to “a favorite fishing spot.” The term *bar* follows closely the long-accepted usage: a “stream-bar” deposit, typically found at the mouth of larger rivers. It could also be classified as a fluvial feature, when located up-river.

Cultural Generics. A list of the “cultural generics” appears in Table 4. Note first of all that the total number of cultural terms is far below the number of physical terms. This pattern reflects the fact that for most of Belize’s history the people were primary resource extractors, that is, loggers, fishermen, traders, forest-product collectors, hunters. In other words, the features of the landscape they deemed most significant were “natural” features instead of “cultural” ones. Even today, Belize has a very low population density and human impact on the landscape has been minimal compared to that seen in the settlers’ places of origin (Frost 89–100).

In Belize two types of cultural generics can be distinguished: “function” and “location” types. Function terms designate site-specific places or activities such as hospital, airport, or lookout. Location terms are more general in nature and usually evoke a broader feeling of “place.” The differences between the two will become clearer by illustration.

Among the location terms, note the high frequency of *bank* and *camp* (Fig. 4). As a historical tracer, *bank* is useful because this Creole term identified a riverside mahogany or logwood cutting operation. Though these operations were ephemeral, the names often remained in the folk toponymy. There are scores of *banks* listed on earlier maps, and many are used colloquially today that do not appear on the official maps. Mapping of these rapidly disappearing names would greatly assist in

Table 4. The "cultural" generic placenames of Belize.

| Function | Frequency | Location | Frequency |
|-----------------|-----------|----------------|------------|
| Airport | 1 | Bank | 40 |
| Barquerdier | 5 | Cairn | 5 |
| Beacon | 1 | Camp | 53 |
| Boom | 4 | Central (camp) | 2 |
| Bridge | 3 | City | 1 |
| Canal | 1 | Hall | 2 |
| Church | 1 | Home | 3 |
| College | 1 | House | 2 |
| Farm | 2 | Landing | 9 |
| Ferry | 1 | Park | 1 |
| Highway | 3 | Port | 1 |
| Lemonal | 1 | Pueblo | 3 |
| Light | 3 | Rendezvous | 1 |
| Lighthouse | 4 | Ruins | 1 |
| Lookout | | Settlement | 1 |
| Spanish Lookout | 2 | Station | 1 |
| Fire Lookout | 5 | Forest Station | 2 |
| Oil Drill | 1 | Rice Station | 2 |
| Pen | 4 | Town | 6 |
| Pier | 1 | Village | 5 |
| Potrero | 1 | Ville | 3 |
| Prison | 1 | Waterside | <u>1</u> |
| Quarry | 1 | | 145 |
| Road | 26 | | |
| Shipyard | 1 | | |
| Trail | 3 | TOTALS: | |
| Walk | 3 | Function = | 81 |
| Wharf | <u>1</u> | Location = | <u>145</u> |
| | 81 | | 226 |

reconstructing the cultural landscape of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in Belize (Morris 11, 43; Caiger 170).

The areal distribution of *bank* is also significant; most are located within fifty kilometers of the low-lying coastal plain on small distributaries or along main rivers such as those in the El Cayo area. All had direct access to the sea or other major waterway, for example, the Belize River. These locations, of course, reflect the simple technology

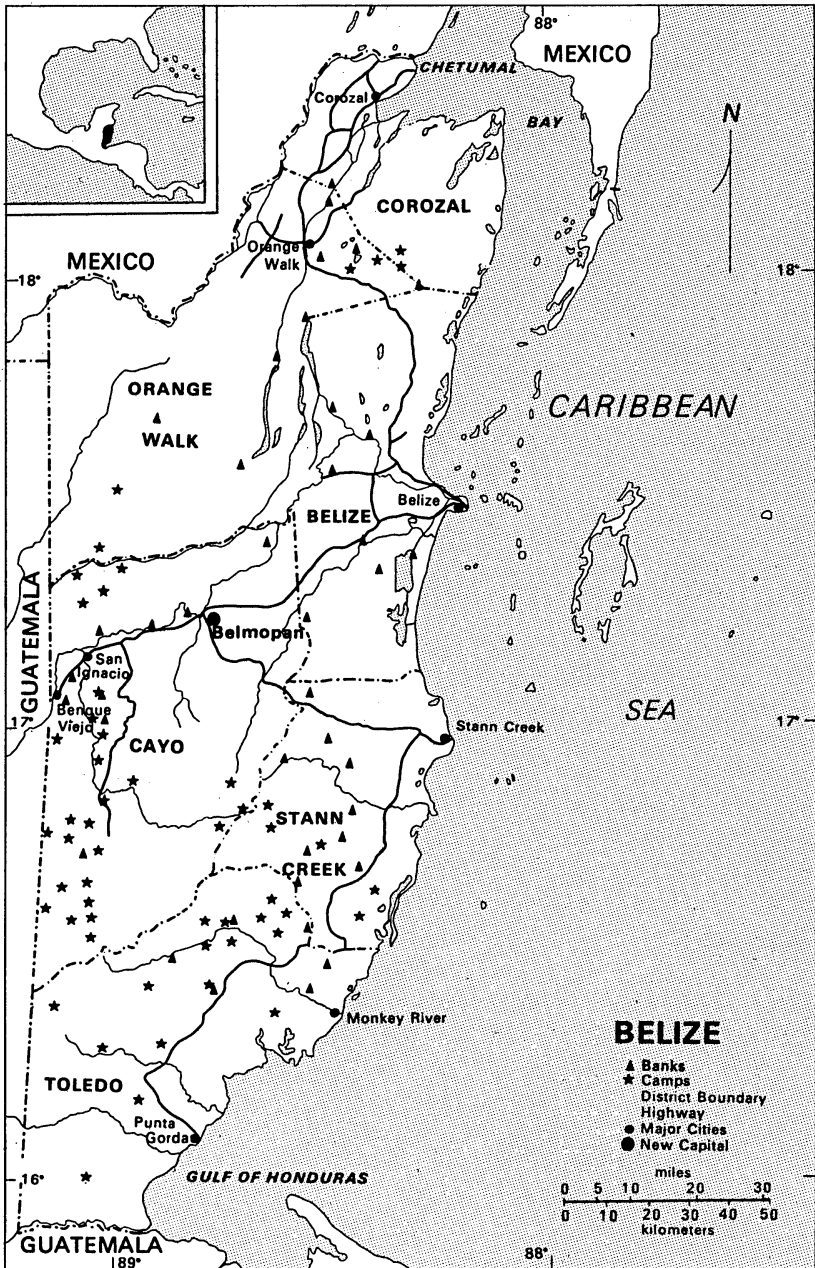


Fig. 4. Distribution of generic terms *bank* and *camp*.

of the early days when the only exploitable logs were those close enough to streams to be dragged or felled directly into them and then floated downstream. This limited significantly the areal impact of cutting.

The term *bank* has been in Belize long enough to have even been absorbed into the local Ladino dialect as *benque*, as in *Benque Viejo* (from the Spanish word meaning "old"), a small village on the Belize River near El Cayo. In the Baymen period an establishment on the Old (Belize) River was called *Old Bank*, a name probably reshaped by immigrant Lacandone and Ketchi Indians. The same reshaping is seen throughout the northern district of Belize where immigrants from Quintana Roo settled.

Whereas the term *bank* reflects an older usage, the term *camp* (Fig. 4) is used for exploitation centers of more modern origin, whose technology and access to market was by off-road vehicles, trucks, bulldozers, and the "iron-donkey" (steam-powered high-line cable). With this new technology exploitation of the hilly interior in the south became feasible. Many "camps" were established in the 1900's to exploit the "pitch pines" (*Pinus caribea*) in the Mountain Pine Ridge area, where there are no navigable streams, only logging roads. Other changes in economic history are reflected in this placename distribution. Today, among the most valuable forest products are chicle (for chewing gum), rubber, and some hardwoods. But the technology requires an extensive exploitation pattern. The early mahogany or logwood cutting period was more suited to intensive clear-cutting in the dense virgin stands of gallery forest along major streams.

Of the remaining "location" generic terms a few are intriguing: *rendezvous* suggests a smugglers' or buccaneers' hideout; *landing* was used to describe a trans-shipment point (break-in-bulk); *waterside* appears to be a creolization of *landing*. Though Belize is far from being heavily urbanized, its urban generic terms do indicate a hierarchy that is correlated with size, from *city* through *town*, *village*, *ville*, *pueblo*, *bank*, and *camp*. Terms even describe places down to the single dwelling, as evoked by the terms: *house*, *home*, and *hall*. The Spanish term *central* is used only once in a heavy chicle-producing area and appears to be in lieu of *camp*.

Ruins as a term is self-evident, referring to an archeological site from the Mayan Pre-Contact Period. In this regard it should be pointed out that the folk toponymy refers to scores of places with this generic; their mapping could be significant in locating as yet undiscovered archeological sites. The single use of *park* and *port* are of modern origin, the first

referring to a forest preserve/national park set up within the last forty years.

Those generics in the second category of “cultural” terms, the “function” type, portray specificity in activities restricted to limited human-modified sites, such as *lighthouse*, *oil drill*, and *airport*. This is in contrast to the “location” terms, which include many place-related functions or activities such as *city*, *camp*, and *bank*. In Belize a unique “function” term is *barquedier*. It originated in the Spanish term *Embarcadero* meaning “quay” or “wharf” (Burdon 163). Old maps show a bizarre corruption of it spelled “*barky dear*.” According to John Burdon, compiler of the Crown Colony’s archives, these were sites for “chipping and marking” the mahogany and logwood prior to export (163). The anthropologist J. Eric Thompson refers to these sites as “collection points in the streams where logs were placed during the dry-season awaiting the ‘flood’ of the rainy-season to carry them downstream” (224). Both these accounts illustrate their specificity in function in comparison to the more established and multi-functional locational terms such as *camp* or *bank* and *landing*.

One of the most unusual generics is *boom*, from “a long boom stretched across the Belize River to which the log rafts coming downstream were chained until claimed by the respective owners” (Caiger 170). Each logging company and group of cutters would have its own “brand” to mark the logs. This unique “roundup” function of the “boom” is substantiated by an article in the October 21, 1826, issue of the *Honduras Gazette*, which recounts how an unusually heavy seasonal flood tore the boom away from its moorings and allowed many of the rafts and logs to be carried to sea (Morris 12).

But just as *haulover* no longer exists in the functional sense (it being transferred to a bridge and creek), likewise a *boom* is no longer present at the mouth of the Belize River. Yet the name lives on as a transfer name (as in *Burrell’s Boom*) or just as *Boom* (originally a small settlement constructed in 1961 for homeless victims of Hurricane Hattie). Other places on the landscape still also retain the term *boom*, sometimes in the official toponymy but more often in the vernacular folk system.

Another fascinating historical tracer is *Spanish Lookout*. There is some controversy as to who was looking out for whom. Local interpretations say these were fortifications or watchtowers built by Baymen to warn of approaching Spanish soldiers or ships. But Anderson (16) suggests that the “lookouts” were built by the Spanish to keep the logwood cutters within

their specified concessions and to police any "interloping." The extent of this generic term is actually much greater than that shown by the official toponymy. During my three years living in Belize I ran across many small places with this name not named on official maps. The importance of preserving these historical tracers is again highlighted.

The generic *walk*, most commonly applied to coconut groves, is a fascinating example of creativity in naming. The term seems to have arisen from the custom of "walking" through the groves every few days to pick up fallen coconuts. The groves are almost exclusively linear features aligned with the ocean-facing beaches on the windward side of the coral cays. Later, as other crops became significant, the term was transferred directly to them as well, for example, *Orange Walk*, a district capital and center of a large citrus-growing region. Even today the citrus groves tend to be aligned along the river banks in a linear fashion occupying the most fertile soils deposited on the natural levees of the large rivers. Another term related to the above and translated as "lemon grove" is the Spanish word *lemonal*; it appears as the local name of a hamlet in the citrus belt in northern Belize.

The difference between a *road* and a *highway* in Belize illustrates well how cultural-ecological adaptation occurred. The use of *road* implies either a destination or a point of origin; *Yalbac Road*, for example, is "the road to Yalbac." Highways link many places and are regional. The generic *highway* implies function rather than direction, for example, *Hummingbird Highway* or *Southern Highway*.

Most of the remaining generics in the "function" category are self-explanatory, except possibly *potrero*, the Spanish term for "pasture" or "meadow." In most other cases the terms simply describe and categorize the man-made object or socio-economic activity carried out at the site, for example, *prison*, *lighthouse*, *ferry*, *pier*, *quarry*, *bridge*, *beacon*, *pen* (*corral*), *church*, *college*, and so on.

Ethnic Distribution of Placenames

Whether one considers generic, genetic, or specific categories of placenames, one striking fact is apparent. Most of the placenames in Belize have a current distribution that reflects closely the ethnic migration history (Fig. 5). The English/Creole peoples (including Garifuna) settled the coastal areas, cays, and major river areas first. The distribution of names reflects closely that fact.

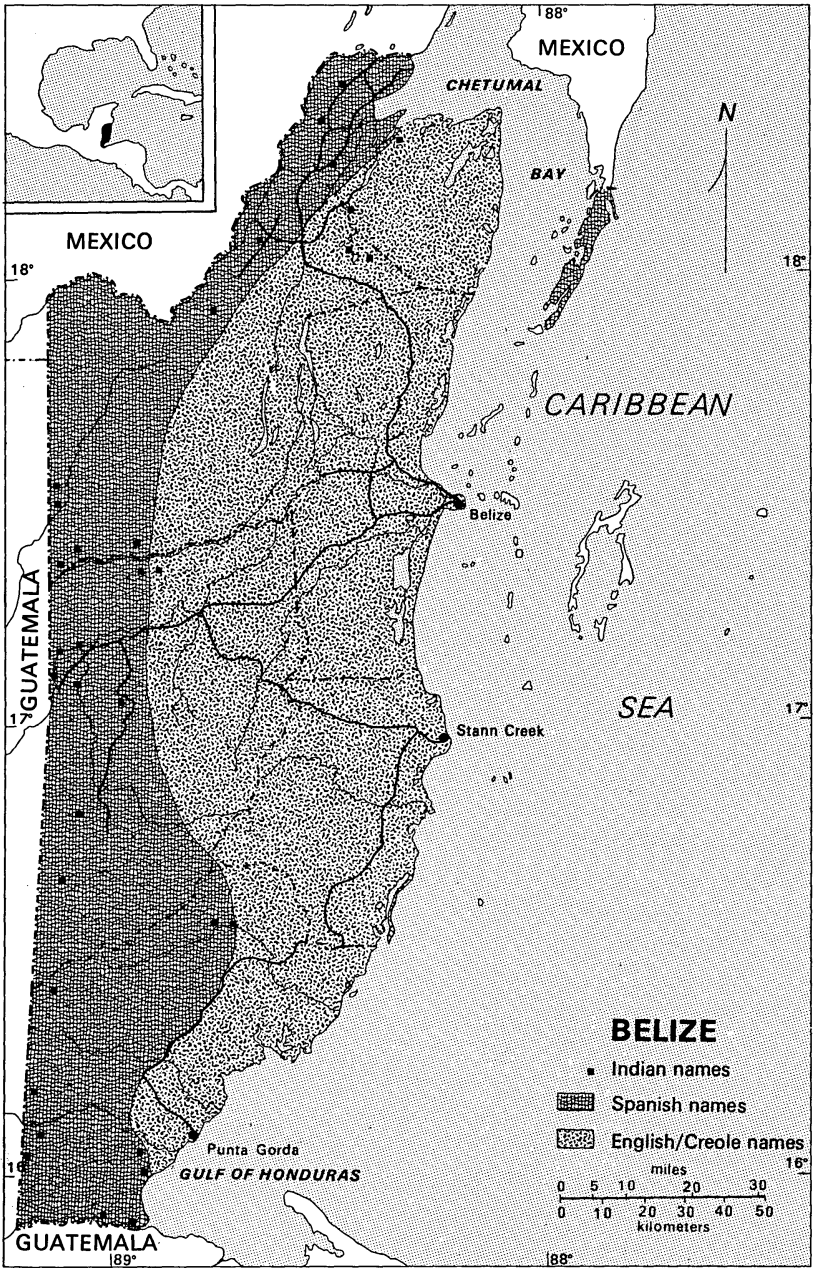


Fig. 5. Ethnic/linguistic distribution of placenames.

Later arrivals of Lacandon and Yucatec Indians and other Spanish peoples originating from the surrounding border areas (for example, the Peten of Guatemala and the Yucatan of Mexico) left most of their names closer to the border areas where they settled. The latter were primarily peasant farmers and chicle collectors. A few became fishermen, resulting, for example, in placenames like *San Pedro* on Ambergris Cay in the north. The distribution of Spanish/Indian names reflects closely this settlement and migration history.

Conclusions

In conclusion, several generalizations regarding the process of placenaming in Belize are evident. First, the generic names from the pre-independence period show that the inhabitants (whether of African, Amerindian, Spanish, or northern European heritage) had an intimate knowledge of and close interaction with the physical environment. That the names quite accurately classify and describe the environment demonstrates man's inherent desire to understand and describe his world — and naming is one of the most direct and intimate ways to satisfy normal “folk-scientific” curiosity.

Secondly, the dominant “hydrological” nature of the environment in Belize (fluvial and marine) comes through clearly in both the frequency, spatial distribution, and diversity of names. Note that there are more water generic terms than land types, and in general physical placenames far outnumber the cultural ones. In addition, the nature of the inhabitants' economic interaction with this hydrological environment comes through strongly.

Note also that the ethnic origin of names is highly correlated with economic history. This is not surprising; livelihood and ethnicity are often correlated in such traditional settings. Placenames reveal how dependent on “the sea” (and on the off-shore reefs and cays) were the Creole, Garifuna, British, and Dutch and how later migrants came to depend more on agriculture, forest extraction (rubber), lumber, and so on.

Another observation seems warranted: which ethnic group's names were most frequently retained in the toponymy (even though the names were frequently corrupted or changed in meaning) largely reflected who held cultural, political, and territorial control at the time. Recall that the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries saw the British and Spanish Empires at their peak of competition. The “balance of power” ex-

hibited between the Spanish (Mainland culture area) and northern European (Rimland culture area) is clearly exhibited in both the frequency, distribution, and process of altering names. For example, that a British name – *Old Bank* – became *Benque Viejo* seems to show “who was on top” politically at the time. At present, many former English/Creole names are disappearing under “cultural/political” pressure from Amerindian and Spanish influence. I believe this reflects current cultural and political reality in the region.

What does the toponymy considered here tell us about the nature of pre-independence Belize? The picture is basically of an underdeveloped and under-populated country, exemplifying an economy based on extraction of primary products from the forest, sea, river, or farm. After all, Belize was an environment where human survival depended largely on a direct relationship with that environment – for food, transportation, and even personal security, for example, hiding from the Spanish or knowing where the channels were to traverse the reef or how to navigate the treacherous river bars and lagoons in all types of weather.

Finally, a trend which should be monitored over time is the changing distribution of names by language and ethnic origin. Today Belize is experiencing rapid cultural change, particularly because of the influx of Indian/Spanish immigrants. Population growth is also higher among these people, compared to the Creole. Will Spanish/Indian names completely supplant the older Creole/English names? Or will some kind of “permanent balance” be achieved? Will this portion of the Rimland/Mainland border be pushed back to the sea? There are those who fear Belize is already losing its original “Rimland” cultural heritage (West and Augelli) because of this migrant wave from the “Mainland” culture area.

As Belize moves into the twenty-first century, much of its rustic past will disappear. But whatever its future, Belize will carry on its landscape vestiges of its history, permanently embedded in the toponymy, whether it be the official one written on maps, or the folk one that lives on in the collective memory of those who continue to put their mark on the landscape by naming its physical and cultural features.

Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

Notes

1. The placenames used in this study were extracted from the topographic series produced by the British Overseas Survey Department in 1963. Along with this map as the base, I consulted many other historical sources (especially the map collections in the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, and the American Geographical Society, Milwaukee) to investigate both the origin and the evolution of placename generics. The following were particularly helpful: *West India Atlas*, Lavoisne's *Atlas* (which includes Faber's and Jeffry's maps), *J. Pinkerton's Modern Atlas*, the several maps by Arrowsmith, Allan's *Plan of Belize*, Owen and Barnett's *Charts*, and the *USBGN Gazetteer*.
2. For a good general history, see David Waddell. Among those who have documented some of the current sociopolitical changes occurring in Belize are Nigel Bolland and Dave Broad.
3. For additional background see the article by Marvin Frost, who has published case studies describing man's effect on the landscape and wildlife of Belize.
4. See the inset map on Owen and Barnett's Hydrographic chart of the Gracias a Dios Harbour, circa 1835-40. The term "haulover" is placed precisely where a narrow sandspit separates an interior lagoon harbor from the open sea.
5. In past years an excellent exhibit concerning this unusual karst feature was displayed in the Earth Sciences Museum of the University of California, Riverside.
6. See Gritzner (234-35) for a discussion of how English settlers applied the term *creek* in the same way in North America.
7. It is fascinating that the use of *bogue* in Belize is very similar to that documented by Roger Payne in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. He notes that while some have supposed that the word comes from a Choctaw Indian word it is more likely of Spanish origin (40-41).

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*Chapter 19 of George R. Stewart's *Names on the Land*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Lexikos, 1982), has the title "America Discovers Columbus," about the patriotic fervor during and after the Revolution, resulting in names ranging from the new capital of South Carolina (1786), to the major river on the Northwest coast (1792), and many more.