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French and Pseudo-French Placenames in the United States

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The simple evocation of French placenames in the United States almost immediately brings to mind all the *Lafayettes* and *Lafayettevilles* scattered over the land, or the numerous *Paris*'s, *Lyons*'s or *Marseilles*'s, *Bordeaux*'s, one finds here and there in this great country. But as any experienced name scholar will tell you, French onomastic heritage in the United States goes well beyond the memory of France. It is a faithful reminder of the fact that at one time a considerable portion of this land was part of New France, that settlers came not only from the land of Louis XIV, le Roi-soleil, but also from French Canada and later on from French-speaking Belgium and Switzerland. Many of you will also remember that more than thirty states of the union were first explored by French and French-Canadian voyageurs and fur traders.

It would be fair to say that the most visible aspect of French onomastics in this country is indeed its placenames, many of which have survived to this day through a series of rules which I shall discuss later. But toponymy is not alone in providing a lasting image of French names. The contribution of anthroponymy should not be forgotten. It surfaces not only in family names but also in street names, names of institutions, and even objects. How many in this audience know that the official rifle of the US Army during WW II, the Garand rifle, owes its name to Québec-born inventor Jean-C. Garand? That the great city of Milwaukee was founded by a French-Canadian, Salomon Juneau, and that one of the first mayors of Los Angeles (1874–1875) was another French-Canadian, Prudent Beaudry, the man who designed the sewer system of that city and built the first street car line. He was originally from Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines near Montréal and left his name to an important boulevard and a well-known restaurant in that city. Many Americans would be surprised to learn that one of the most popular melodies in America, "Home Sweet Home," is in fact the composition (1870) of yet another French-Canadian, Salomon Mazurette, who lived most of his life in Detroit, Michigan, and was organist at St. Ann's Church in that city for many years.

In fact, few people realize how deeply French presence is embedded in this country. In Louisiana, it has flourished to an extent that in 1963,

the governor gave official status to the French language in that state. French-Canadians themselves are often amazed to learn that near the end of the nineteenth century, the concentration of Quebeckers in New England was such that for many years it was impossible to distinguish between the Canadian and the American components of the French Canadian nation. At that time, the city of Manchester in New Hampshire was the sixth largest French-speaking city in North America, well ahead of several important Québec agglomerations.

Indeed, I could go on describing the extent of French presence in the USA, but that would go much beyond the scope of this address. Let me concentrate therefore on toponymic issues only. No American onomastician needs to be reminded that the first placenames of the continent that was to become America were aboriginal and that due to the absence of written tradition the study of these toponyms will perhaps forever be compromised. Their origin, meaning and evolution escape us. In fact, these toponyms only became known to us for the first time thanks to the writings of Spanish, British, and French explorers, missionaries, and traders who recorded them in their documents or on maps using transliteration into their own language. A considerable portion of this nomenclature was transliterated into French in such fundamental documents relating to the history of this continent as the Jesuit Relations.

As for French placenames themselves, it can be safely said that they appeared for the first time on the North American continent in the earlier part of the sixteenth century. Working for the King of France, François I, Florentine explorer Giovanni da Verrazano was the first to have discovered a continental barrier between Florida and Newfoundland. As early as 1524, he gave this vast tract of land the name of *Nouvelle-France* in honor of the monarch in whose service he had undertaken his expeditions. Historian Marcel Trudel identified some twenty French toponyms along the eastern seaboard of the United States which relate to Da Verrazano's explorations (35). These are mainly toponymic transfers from France such as *Dieppe*, *Honfleur* in South Carolina, or *Angoulême*, which applied to the actual site of the city of New York. This first stratum of French placenames was short lived, however, since it was soon to be replaced by the toponomastics of Spanish explorers such as Gomez and Vasquez de Ayllon. Also short lived were the French names of Florida established between 1562 and 1565 by Ribault and Laudonnière as they unsuccessfully tried to establish a Huguenot settlement in the Spanish-claimed colony.

Implantation of French placenames really began with the explorations of Samuel de Champlain in Acadia and the Saint Lawrence River. Christian Morissonneau's extensive study of Champlain's geographical

nomenclature shows that many of the French names recorded in the southern portion of Acadia along the coast of Maine down to Cape Cod were already replaced with English toponyms as early as 1610 as the British progressively made claims in New England. Such was not the case of the Saint Lawrence Valley, however, which became the cradle of French settlement in North America. As exploration of the continent moved inward, so did the extent of toponymic designations, covering the land with hundreds of new names, some of them commemorative, most of them descriptive. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the discovery of the Mississippi River by Marquette and Jolliet and the foundation of Louisiana by Cavelier de La Salle brought French nomenclature through the middle of the continent to the south, blocking for several years any British expansion west of the coast of New England.

It is difficult to evaluate the exact number of French toponyms that relate to the French colonial empire in North America. Only partial studies have been carried out and one can only wish that events such as the First International Conference on French Toponymy in North America held in Quebec City in 1984 could be repeated. For the first time, researchers were able to get a collective grasp on the nature and scope of French nomenclature on the continent. At the same time, participants also realized the magnitude of the task set before them of recording these names for scholarly interpretation.

For many years, my own research has focussed on French placenames in my adoptive province of Ontario. My continued association with the American Name Society, and my involvement on the editorial board of a dictionary of French-speaking minorities in North America (Dufresne et al.) have led me to bring this knowledge into a much broader perspective and at the same time to concentrate my efforts on the more complex and intricate issues of language contact as evidenced through placenames. More specifically, I have been examining the issue of etymology and Anglo-French admixture. From that point of view, I have found that French onomastics in the United States provide both a considerable body of data and an interesting proving ground for hypotheses.

This body of data must be qualified, however. At the very best, it can only be regarded as preliminary. Very little of it has been subjected to rigorous analysis. Indeed, a survey of the literature shows that there is still widespread confusion among scholars as to the very definition of a French placename. Consultation of the most complete body of available data on the subject, Coulet du Gard's 1986 *Dictionary of French Place Names in the USA* confirms this impression. A significant proportion of the more than 4,000 forms recorded by the author could be qualified as pseudo-French, or having

very little if anything to do with French onomastics. One wonders why names such as *Masena*, *Bonaparte*, *Waterloo* and even *De Kalb* were included. Entries were even provided for English names such as *French Riviera* or *Amelia Island*. As W. F. H. Nicolaisen once pointed out, "onomastic usage and linguistic provenance are frequently two very different matters, both historically and philosophically" (253). Failure to recognize this fundamental dichotomy has resulted in a dictionary which is both confusing and frustrating to the name scholar. In my recent review of the work, I pointed out the main shortcomings of the dictionary, but at this time I would like to take the opportunity to do justice to the wealth of material it provides.

As part of one of my on-going projects, I entered the nomenclature of the dictionary into a database. The main goal of this exercise was to try to identify the various rules by which the original names have evolved into their actual form through Anglo-French admixture. Interestingly, the results have led me to refine my own typology (Lapierre, "La toponymie") based on the Ontario context. This revised typology now comprises six main categories, based on rules of grapho-phonemic integration which I would like to review very briefly with you at this time:

1. Translation, whereby the original French is rendered by linguistic equivalents into the English language:

Rivière Bleue > *Blue River* (Nebraska)
Grands Rapides > *Grand Rapids* (North Dakota)
Lac du Flambeau > *Torch Lake* (Michigan)

2. Integration by agglutination, whereby two or more morphologically independent elements in French are combined into a single one in English:

de l'air > *Delair* (New Jersey)
nez piqué > *Nezpique* (Louisiana)
sans poil > *Sanpoil River* (Washington)

3. Integration by deglutination, whereby one single morphological unit in French is broken down into two or more units in English:

Dutartre > *Du Tart Creek* (South Carolina)
Jean Laverne > *La Verne* (California)
Antoine Lebeau > *Le Beau* (South Dakota)

4. Integration by English transliteration, whereby the orthography of the French name is modified in order to approximate the original pronunciation (often referred to in the literature as "deformations" or "corruptions" of the original, but what is actually going on is a natural onomastic process which has been universally observed):

François > *Franceway* (Arkansas)
Marais de l'orme > *Mary Delarme Creek* (Indiana)
aux arcs > *Ozark* (Michigan)

5. Integration by French transliteration (the opposite of the preceding process, mainly due to early French-Canadian voyageurs or, later, Quebec immigrants):

Robber's Nest > *Robinette* (West Virginia)
Central Falls > *Saintrelle* (Rhode Island)
Sefroi > *St. Froid* (Maine)

6. Integration by assimilation, whereby an element of the French lexicon is transferred to the English onomasticon with little or no change to its orthography (pronunciation is affected since English graphemic values are transferred to the French name):

détroit > *Detroit* (Michigan)
coeur d'alêne > *Coeur d'Alene* (Idaho)
au sable > *Ausable* (New York)

or whereby an element of the French onomasticon is transferred to the English onomasticon, with little or no change to its orthography (again here pronunciation is affected since English graphemic values are transferred to the French name):

Bélanger > *Belanger Island* (Minnesota)
Michel Fallon > *Fallon* (Nevada)
Joachim > *Joachim Creek* (Missouri)

I have purposely not provided statistics for these categories since they would be valid only for Coulet du Gard's dictionary and may not reflect class distribution in the field. Furthermore, these fairly broad categories are by no means mutually exclusive. Indeed, two or more rules may have worked together in bringing the original French toponym to its present-day form. For instance, in the specific *Au Sable*, agglutination combines with lexical and phonological assimilation.

This general typology does not claim to explain – no typology does – but rather to provide useful guidelines in sorting out complex data. We can be grateful to Coulet du Gard for bringing all this information together in his dictionary, but what we need now are scholars to filter through this material, verify name origins, and provide datings. Much work remains to be done especially in the area of etymologies. For instance, it has been claimed in many sources that the names *Smackover* or *Low Freight* in Arkansas ultimately correspond to the French *Chemin couvert* and *L'eau froide*. Although integration by English transliteration – and what W. F. H. Nicolaisen has

called "secondary semantic reinterpretation" (255)—may provide an explanation for this derivation, the claim does not hold if we cannot provide factual proof of the existence and recording of the original French name. And none of the sources which make these claims do. Nor do they provide datings and list the various morphological changes which would allow a scholar to trace the evolution of the name from the etymon into its present-day form in American English. Until we have such crucial information, I'm afraid that many current etymologies will remain nothing but hypotheses, good for a few jokes between onomasticians, but far from scientific truth.

In concluding this short address, my only wish is that I have been able to make you aware that French placenames are well and alive in your country and that more patient and rigorous research is required to document their origin, meaning, and evolution. Without a clear picture of what has happened and the way it has happened, the history of French toponomastics in America will remain incomplete. Indeed, this is an area which holds many challenges and promises for the advancement of name studies.

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1. This is a revised version of the Presidential Address to the American Name Society at the Annual Meeting, December 28, 1991, in San Francisco, California.

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