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## Names Forum

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### Research in Placenames, a Cautionary Note

By Robert M. Rennick

Editor's note: Robert M. Rennick, 588 North Lake Drive, Prestonsburg, KY 41653, has long been involved in the study of placenames and has published several books on names in Kentucky, the latest of which, *Place Names of Pike County, Kentucky*, is reviewed by Rowan Daggett in this issue of *Names*. The following statement is adapted from the introduction to that book. Although the following was written prior to the appearance in these pages of an article by Jon C. Campbell ("Stream Generic Terms as Indicators of Historical Settlement Patterns," *Names* 39.4 [December 1991]: 333-66), Mr. Rennick wanted it to be seen at least in part as a response to that article. We — Mr. Rennick and I — would like to hear from other placename scholars on how "official" placenames, especially generics, conflict with the names actually in use.

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Over the past twenty years I have been involved in the systematic and comprehensive study of the named places and features of Eastern Kentucky. I've completed book-length studies of three counties and smaller studies of a dozen others. What I've learned from this effort has made me rethink much of what I thought I already knew about both the substance and the methods of placename study. Some of what I've learned I'd like to share with other placename researchers as the basis of some things we ought to consider as we plan to carry out our national survey.

First of all, most of what I've learned came from personal interviews and the examination of contemporary land records, historical maps, census material, and various unpublished documents. Very little else was available.

Like most placename researchers, my first step was to examine topographic and state highway maps. And that, I learned, was my first mistake. That is, I approached the study of Kentucky placenames from the perspective of the *name*. It was only after some years of fairly fruitless research that I learned (as Kentucky's geographers and historians already knew) that one should approach this study on the basis of *place* instead.

Of course, we all realize that while maps can be good sources of names and general locations of some of the better known places or features, they can't be fully relied on for more precise locations or for minor features or places. But, more to the point, what I had to learn the hard way was that these maps were not always accurate. I've been told that the names appearing on US Geological Survey topographic maps were derived from personal interviews by USGS fieldworkers with persons who lived on or near the sites. But we don't know when these interviews were done nor with whom. Some persons may have been interviewed who really didn't know the dimensions of the feature or what it was called but simply gave it a name off the top of their heads. And few attempts were made to seek confirmation.

I learned that many errors were made on the topographic maps and perpetuated in succeeding revisions. I learned this when I asked local people the name of their community or the stream they lived on and found it was not the name shown on the map. And my informants usually had no idea why the mappers had recorded the particular names they had. The map names were meaningless to them.

Or to put it another way: back in the days when I was "name conscious" rather than "place aware," I would take my list of names taken from the published maps and show it to the informants, without describing or locating the referents, and as often as not I'd get curious stares and answers like, "I've never heard of some of those places. Where are they?" Only when I showed them unlabeled maps or took them to the places themselves did I learn the names they actually bear.

Or my informants were familiar with some of the map names but told me that these places hadn't been called that for years. Mapping revisions, we know, were so infrequent that name changes were seldom recorded. Name changes were not at all uncommon in Kentucky. I found, in my Kentucky research, that names are not as persistent as some observers have maintained. This is even true of our waterways. Even our principal rivers (every one of them, including the Kentucky and the Cumberland) have had more than one name since white settlers first started giving them names. This has been especially true of our smaller streams (branches, creeks, hollows) as well as our hills, and certainly our man-made features. It was not unusual for these to be renamed with a change in ownership or occupancy. Some of our smaller streams had name changes in almost every generation. Many post offices were given new names with changes in location or when, after their discontinuance, they were re-established at some nearby site.

One of the difficulties in determining locations in eastern Kentucky is that few places remained permanently at one site. Over the years community

boundaries shifted and even streams sometimes altered their courses. Post office sites moved with nearly every change in postmaster, for these were usually in that official's home or store. In the course of the history of some of these offices, the shifts covered several square miles. Few post offices, when they closed, were at the sites they were established on.

Which brings up the matter of determining locations. One of the problems I still have in locating places and features is determining just what it is I'm trying to locate. This is true whether I use the point location system of geographic coordinates or locate something by direction and distance. How does one use geographic coordinates to locate a scattered settlement? The GNIS has tried to do this. But what do these coordinates represent? A large number of our eastern Kentucky settlements, including some goodsized communities, are made up of homes and businesses scattered over quite a large area with no obvious (much less permanent) points of concentration. To what do these coordinates refer? The geographic center of the community? What's that? The demographic center? The location of the post office? Is that the center of the settlement? Most of our communities no longer have post offices. Some never did. Stores? They often moved. And some communities have had more than one store, often two or three miles apart.

I once described this fairly typical Appalachian mountain settlement pattern: the post office is half a mile up the road or creek from a store which is 100 yards beyond the local schoolhouse and another store and just below a local church. And over half of the families that call this community home may live up a dozen branches or hollows off of the main stream. To what *do* the coordinates refer? And how does one determine the coordinates of streams? I suppose it's easy to tell where a stream ends — where it joins a larger stream or a lake, bay, or ocean. But how do you determine the head of a stream? Those of us who have lived in fairly mountainous areas learned early on that there is seldom one head or source of any stream. Nearly every mountain stream I've ever traced had more than one source: springs, rivulets, whatever. And these (and thus their locations) are continually shifting.

One can look at a topographic map and wonder why the mappers labeled the streams the way they did. The main stream has a name as do its forks and branches. How do the mappers determine the route of the main stream and those of its branches? Did they ask the people who lived there? Or did they guess at it? Or simply assume that the wider or longer streams must be the main channels? Many times in the field I have found that what is shown on the map as the main stream is to local people only a tributary. And to them the main stream follows a route identified on the map as tributary.

So I learned early on the importance of determining precisely what is being located.

Back to maps: I learned that the Kentucky State Highway Department's county maps can also be very inaccurate. These maps are usually based on the topographic maps, and lately Highway Department mappers have started including old post offices and settlements. But I've wondered where they came up with some of these locations. Some post offices are shown on these maps several miles away from where we know they were. I've always been able to approximately locate an old post office (or at least some of its sites) by knowing where the postmaster lived. But in some cases the highway maps would place a post office ten road miles away from the homes of the postmasters. Very unlikely in the days when roads were virtually non-existent to have the postmaster living two days journey from his post office.

Another source of information on post office locations are the old Post Office Department's location reports. Unfortunately, these are not available for all offices, especially those established before the Civil War. And they can't be relied on for any accurate pinpointing of locations either. The postmaster-designate was asked to locate his proposed office by road miles from existing offices (or if it were a site change, from the office's preceding location). And he was asked how far it would be from the nearest river or creek. These terms the postmaster-designate often took literally; but what help is it to know that the nearest river, as such, was thirty miles away, and the nearest creek was ten to twelve miles from the proposed office? He was not asked to locate the place itself (as, say, at the mouth of Jones Branch of Smith Creek). Distances and locations were usually in terms of existing roads which have since been replaced by other roads. We may know nothing today about the routes of these early roads. Moreover, these postmasters often had no sense of direction.

In my research I also learned a few things about placenaming. I suppose the main purpose of any survey is to learn the derivations of the names. And we feel very gratified when we think we have discovered at least a plausible explanation for a particularly elusive name. How far must we go in seeking confirmations? Can we ever find them? One thing I learned early on is that few names (applied to eastern Kentucky places) were deliberately given by the namers. I learned that naming is not always a conscious, deliberate act of careful consideration. I've learned much that leads me to believe that many (perhaps most) names were given rather casually, often at the spur of the moment, to satisfy an immediate need for a name, say to prepare a deed, to locate one's residence, or to answer a visiting mapmaker or someone else asking the name of a place or feature

that didn't yet have one. Thus, years later, the significance of the name, if it ever had any, may be impossible to determine.

In general, the longer the name was borne by a place the less likely we are to know why and how, and by whom, it was given. Much less why that particular name was given rather than some other name. Why were some of the tributaries of a major stream given the names of the families that had settled on them while others were named for the vegetation or animal life on their banks, or were imported?

A word on stream generics. Some scholars hoping to establish a typology of stream generics in eastern Kentucky will be very disappointed. It won't be possible for them to do so. The several types of streams are not precisely distinguished in eastern Kentucky. While the term *river* has usually been limited to a major stream that joins the Ohio (e.g., the *Big Sandy River*), there doesn't seem to be any standard for differentiating the other common names for streams: *creek*, *branch*, *fork*, *prong*, or *run*. As generics these terms have often been used interchangeably. Both creeks and forks have been the main tributaries of a river. While *fork*, as a designator term, has been used collectively in the United States to refer to two or more streams of roughly equal size that come together at a certain point, it doesn't, as a generic, have this limited meaning in eastern Kentucky. It has no significance whatever as a designator term. We have only one designator term, and that's *stream*.

In eastern Kentucky, branches are usually primary streams that feed larger streams and usually (though not always) flow from springs. They are generally what we call "wet weather" streams, with seasonal flows. Yet probably as many primary streams are identified with the generic *fork* as with the generic *branch*.

More to the point, these generics are often used interchangeably for the same streams. In talking with several residents of a certain stream, I may hear some refer to that stream as *Jones Fork* and others as *Jones Branch* and even as *Jones Creek*, or even by a double generic—*Jones Fork Creek*. The double generic is quite common in eastern Kentucky.

The Big Sandy River has two main forks: the Levisa and the Tug. According to the topographic maps, these are called *forks*. According to the people who live on them (including me) they are nearly always referred to as *rivers*, or as in the case of the Tug, they're called by the double generic, the *Tug Fork River*. Though we know it's shown on the map as *Levisa*, we don't call it that. And never have. When asked where we live, my neighbors and I have always said on the *Big Sandy* or, simply, *the River*.

I've learned a lot about placenames in the last twenty years. If nothing else, it boils down to knowing how little I really do know. I've learned not

to take anything, including the names themselves, for granted; nor to assume anything about a name's derivation or significance from the name itself; nor to jump to conclusions about the names of a particular area from what others think they have learned about the same names applied elsewhere. I've learned that we have only just begun to scratch the surface in basic placename study in this country.

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### More on *Brittany*

In our March issue, Cleveland Kent Evans (Psychology, Bellevue College, Bellevue, NE 68005) asked for suggestions on why the female name *Brittany* suddenly became so popular in the 1970s and 1980s, reaching the top of the charts in 1989. Brenna Lorenz (Box 1135, Yigo, Guam 96929) offered the following: "According to my data, the name did indeed come in with a rush in the mid-80s, seemingly from nowhere. It appears in none but the most recent name-your-baby books, obviously after the fact. And although I haven't looked at TV data for awhile, I can say that there had been no TV characters named *Brittany* as of 1984 (see Alex McNeil *Total Television* [Penguin, 1984]). The earliest *Brittany* in my collection is a girl named *Brittney* in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1969. The next occurrences are females *Brittainy* and *Brittany* (ages unknown) recorded in Pensacola, Florida in 1980. As of 1984, they start showing up in large numbers. RElated names, such as *Brett*, *Brit*, *Britt*, *Breton*, *Britten*, and *Britton* show up earlier, both in baby name books and in records, for females as well as males. I have found *Breton* (born 1970) in Rochester, New York; *Britten*, who had a baby in Pensacola, Florida, in 1991; *Brit* (daughter of a 76-year-old, recorded 1987) from Little Rock, Arkansas; *Britton Pope*, born in Alabama in 1811. Males bearing these names are much more common. It looks as if *Erin* and *Brittany* started showing up at about the same time (late 60s, early 70s). I suspect that the first instances arose spontaneously around the country in response to the romanticism associated with Celtic culture. But something (or someone) must have touched off the *Brittany* explosion in the early 80s." Ms. Lorenz concludes by suggesting that perhaps the actress Morgan Brittany could tell us what inspired her to choose *Brittany* when she changed her name from *Suzanne Cupito*.