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## In Memoriam

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### **Meredith Frederic “Pete” Burrill, 1902-1997**

With the recent death of Dr. Meredith Frederic Burrill, widely known as Pete, the world of geographic names lost perhaps its most effective and ardent missionary. His interest in the field of geography brought him a PhD in 1930 from the Graduate School of Geography at Clark University in Worcester, MA. His early career was marked by a variety of assignments, including teaching geography at the University of Oklahoma. In 1940, he moved to Washington, DC to take a position in the Office of Land Management in the Department of the Interior. Soon after, the growing involvement of the US in World War II required maps and charts with placenames written in the Roman alphabet to support military operations in a number of areas, especially the Far East. In 1943, the US Board on Geographic Names, first established in 1890, was recreated after having been abolished nine years earlier. As the war progressed it became necessary to form a larger organization. In 1944, the Secretary of the Interior formed the Division of Geography, which, in conjunction with an advisory committee on names, worked in collaboration with the recently reestablished Board on Geographic Names. The new organization was then tasked to provide names for military purposes. The Secretary appointed Dr. Burrill director of the division as well as executive secretary of the BGN.

The assignment permitted him to apply his many managerial and research talents under circumstances most challenging, given the enormous military requirement for names. His office soon grew and by the war's end included some 175 experts in cartography, geography, languages, and linguistics. They worked together as toponymists and transliterated thousands of names from a number of different oriental scripts to the roman alphabet for use on military maps and charts. Under Dr. Burrill's leadership, a number of these toponymists developed reputations as leading experts in the field; they participated in national and international meetings, wrote papers for federal and academic

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publications, and brought a justified high reputation to the field of applied toponymy.

When the war ended the future of the Division of Geography—and also that of the Board on Geographic Names—was in doubt. Dr. Burrill appeared before congress where he justified the need for a continuing national program to standardize placenames. His involvement brought quick results: the Board was reestablished by law in 1947 as the national agency responsible for names. The charter establishing the Board stipulated several agencies as members to ensure that the Board met their requirements for names. Dr. Burrill was appointed the new Board's executive secretary and also the executive secretary of its Foreign Names Committee. Although the Division of Geography was terminated a few years later, Dr. Burrill and the staff remained within the Department of the Interior. Among the Board's accomplishments was its gazetteer program which provided extensive lists of names in foreign countries. Gazetteers were initially "for official use only," but at the time of Dr. Burrill's retirement in 1973, distribution had expanded to a wider audience.

The nature of the Board's programs brought changes. In 1958 the domestic names staff relocated to the US Geological Survey in the Department of the Interior to support its domestic mapping programs more directly. In 1969, Dr. Burrill transferred to a new organization created to coordinate all military cartographic work, and the foreign names staff moved to the Army Map Service. The creation of the Defense Mapping Agency in 1972 brought all military cartographic efforts into one organization, and Dr. Burrill took a position in the headquarters of that body in Washington, DC. These changes required Dr. Burrill periodically to redefine his role as the Board's principal manager and to develop new links with various operational units. Despite such organizational dynamics, he continued his effective work at the national and international levels. In addition to his responsibilities for domestic and foreign names programs, he was involved in BGN advisory committees responsible for names of undersea features, names in Antarctica, and subjects related to a variety of BGN concerns, including the creation of romanization systems.

While thus heavily occupied with management and production tasks, Dr. Burrill also was active in professional organizations. He was a

member of the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping, the American Geophysical Union, the American Name Society, the American Society of Professional Geographers, the Association of American Geographers, the British Royal Geographical Society, the International Congress of Onomastic Sciences and other organizations. He served as an officer in a number of these organizations, including president of the American Name Society in 1955. He felt perhaps his greatest contribution was to preside over negotiations to merge the ASPG, which focussed on applied geography, with the AAG, which was mainly academic, and to help create a new and enlarged AAG. He was president of that body in 1966.

Dr. Burrill also was a major force in United Nations programs on names. Under his guidance and in collaboration with experts from several countries who first convened in 1955, the UN began a series of international technical sessions and conferences. From the start, he was a leading participant. He served as president of the first UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in Switzerland in 1967 and he was active in conferences even after his retirement in 1973. His ability to develop close ties among nations otherwise occupied with Cold War politics was admirable. In addition, he submitted many reports relating not only to the work of the Board as it could apply to other national programs but also to guidelines designed to enhance UN efforts. Reflecting Dr. Burrill's involvement in and dedication to names, several BGN staff experts have since attended UN meetings, served as chairs of numerous committees and successfully directed sessions that otherwise might have been less productive than they were.

While principally involved with applied toponymy, Dr. Burrill also was a productive researcher who gave numerous reports and wrote many papers. His records show nearly 100 items, not all of them on geographical names. The earliest was "Forecasting Afternoon Humidity with Special Reference to Forest-Fire Weather in New England," published in the *American Meteorological Bulletin* in 1926. His interest in meteorology is shown by a number of other writings and presentations on that topic. Other early topics included land use and economic geography. His initial article on names was "Reorganization of the US Board on Geographic Names" which appeared in the *Geographical Review* in 1946. A major personal interest concerned the origins of

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generic terms and the variations of their meanings. In one project, he considered generic terms as found in a number of foreign language dictionaries and found a wide range of definitions. In a more extensive project, he grouped generic terms associated with bodies of water as listed on large-scale US topographic maps. It was evident that differing terms were often applied to identical or similar features and furthermore that a term normally found in areas having a common linguistic background might be found at substantial distances from one another. For example, "bayou," normally used in Louisiana, also is part of a name in northern Indiana. Such distributional patterns and differing meanings of generic terms remain a challenge to BGN toponymists. It is fair to say that while he was a scholar in many ways, and indeed devoted an important part of his life to teaching and research, he was dedicated also to the practical aspects of what many might consider an academic topic. In fact, through his efforts and those of his colleagues, Dr. Burrill succeeded in showing the important ways in which names relate to a broad range of everyday human communications.

Dr. Burrill's contributions to toponymy were recognized during his lifetime. He received commendations from the Department of the Interior and the Central Intelligence Agency; Bates College in Maine, where he did his undergraduate work, and where he was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, awarded him an Honorary Doctor of Science Degree.

Dr. Burrill had many organizational and integrative skills. He was an effective communicator, a great writer and speaker, as those who had the good fortune to read his materials or hear his presentations will confirm. In a world often complicated by changing federal realities (the "bureaucracy"), he was able to cope with trying times, to survive and to advance the cause of the BGN and the other organizations with which he was associated. His career illustrated his ability to work with people representing a variety of disciplines so their combined expertise could be focussed on the solution of common problems, often problems dealing with the standardization of geographic names. At the personal level, he liked music and sang in a local church choir for many years and was active in civic affairs. His ready sense of humor enabled him to laugh easily at a joke, no matter how corny, and to utter a gag or two when the opportunity presented itself. He also was a family man. He is

survived by Betty Didcoct Burrill, also a geographer, whom he married in 1981. (His first wife, Ellen, died in 1979.) He is also survived by two children, Elizabeth Allard and Dr. Robert Burrill (also a geographer), two grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

It was my honor to succeed him as Executive Secretary of the Board on Geographic Names and its Foreign Names Committee in 1973, and to work until my retirement in 1993 at the national and international levels in areas with which he was closely associated—but I hasten to add that I did not replace him. No one could. Nevertheless, I had the good fortune and pleasure to consult with him and accompany him on many occasions. He was always available to discuss any topic related to the field which we shared. We also had a pleasant personal relationship and it was my privilege to serve as guest editor of a Festschrift in his honor (*Names* 32, December 1984). That the Board continues as the world's foremost names standardization agency is a tribute to how he served his country and the international community. We should all lift a glass to Pete.

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