

Numbers in Placenames

Frank R. Hamlin

University of British Columbia

The most obvious factor that accounts for numbers forming parts of placenames — most of them minor, odonyms being especially numerous — is expediency. Such names, of which New York's *Fifth Avenue* is no doubt the most renowned, serve the practical needs of urbanization and administration in a time of new development and, in many cases, become established in popular usage. Another large category of examples relates to distances, along a major highway, from an important supply center: while most examples of this type are modern, there are a few in Europe that survive from antiquity. These two types, however, far from account for all the circumstances that may lead to numbers becoming part of recognized placenames. The origin of "numerical" names is occasionally incidental or anecdotal; but there are many more that mark junctions or boundaries, or refer to groups of natural or man-made features. Where such groupings are involved, certain numbers are more frequently favored than others: clearly, not all numbers are equally acceptable in popular toponymic usage.

When talking about people, "number" appears to be the very antithesis of "name." Places, however, are more readily numbered; and a surprising variety and range of placenames do indeed include numbers. The following article makes no claim to being an exhaustive study of the subject, which appears hitherto to have received remarkably little attention,² but it may be regarded merely as a short essay in comparative toponymy. It is based on a representative — though perhaps somewhat arbitrary — selection of reliable survey volumes (listed below, under References) for parts of Canada, the U.S.A., the United Kingdom, and France, with the addition of a few Australian examples from Reed (1973).

It will be evident that only a very small proportion of the material considered here has to do with the names of towns or cities. Most of the data are from the field of *minor* place nomenclature: micro-toponymy, including odonymy.

On the scale of such minor names, one immediately sees the relevance of the types of street-naming, so very widespread in North America,³ that go from *First Avenue* to *Seventy-Third Avenue*, as in Vancouver, B.C., or from *Number One Road* to *Number Nine Road*, as in the neighboring city of Richmond, B.C. The latter are the north-south section roads of Richmond, spaced at one-mile intervals and counting from the western

shoreline of the city. Patterns like this, and the more complex systems of the *rangs* of Québec, studied by Louis-Edmond Hamelin (1989), start out as administratively convenient devices related to the recording of land divisions in newly developed territory. In very many cases, they have been perpetuated and come to function as proper names in ordinary usage. Such systems are much rarer in Europe, but occasional parallels do arise in comparable circumstances. For instance, a belt of land extending much of the way from Sète to Agde, on the Languedoc coast between the stabilized shoreline and the coastal lagoons, includes a series of farmsteads with the uninspired names (apparently of 19th-century origin) *Troisième Mas*, *Quatrième Mas*, *Cinquième Mas*, and *Sixième Mas*.

A variety of rather similarly numbered sequences can readily be found in Canadian toponymy. As one enters Vancouver's Burrard Inlet by sea from the Strait of Georgia, the *First Narrows* are more usually known as *Lions' Gate*; but usage offers no alternative for the *Second Narrows*, and the Trans-Canada Highway crosses the inlet by what is generally referred to as the *Second Narrows Bridge* (though officially it is *The Ironworkers' Memorial Second Narrows Bridge*). Similarly, the beach in Vancouver's West End generally known as *English Bay* is followed, along the shoreline of Stanley Park, by *Second Beach* and *Third Beach*.

Distance markers along roads and highways are a plentiful source of numerical names. For example, the Cariboo Highway, built during the 19th-century gold rush, northwards through central British Columbia from Lillooet, was provided with roadhouses at one-mile intervals. Though few of the actual houses are still standing, a good many of their names — that is, their numbers (for name and number are here one and the same) — are still in use, as attested by such businesses as the *70 Mile Store*, *83 Mile Service*, *99 Mile Motel*, *108 Food Mart*, etc. While *70 Mile House* and *150 Mile House* remain very small communities, *100 Mile House* (familarly called *Hundred Mile*) has grown into a town with over two thousand people.

Although no other members of the series are here commemorated in toponymy, as far as I know, *Forty Mile River* (Yukon) indicates distance from Fort Reliance. Similarly, the mountains of *Seventy Mile Range* in Queensland, Australia, are 70 miles from Ravenswood, the nearest town. Very many similar examples, fairly recent formations, could be cited in the newer countries.

On the other hand, most of the French distance-names that I am aware of go back to the Roman period: *Uchaud* (Gard) from *octavum* "eighth," at the 8th milestone on the *Via Domitia* going from Nîmes towards Narbonne, and the minor name *Quart* from *quartum* "fourth" at the 4th milestone on the same road east of Nîmes, going towards Beaucaire; *Sixte* (Michery, Yonne) from *sextum* "sixth," six Gaulish leagues north of Sens on the road to Paris; *Delme* (Moselle) from *duodecimum* "twelfth," at the

12th milestone on the road from Metz to Château-Salins, etc. (for further examples, see Nègre 1990-1: I, 361-2).

A few of the examples already mentioned, Vancouver's beaches and narrows, and sites along the Roman roads of France, are exceptional in type in that they include or are formed by ordinal numbers. The vast majority of numbers in names are cardinal numbers, and most of these are quite small (no more than ten), multiples of ten, or large rounded numbers. By comparison with the other *Houses* of the Cariboo Highway, I cannot help wondering whether *100 Mile House* has grown into a town only because of the locality's not-too-important status as a road junction. Is the conveniently round figure of this "name" also a factor? However, any and all cardinal numbers can and occasionally do occur where there is a reference to distance, as demonstrated by such apparently random examples as the *108 Food Mart* (mentioned above), *Forty-Five Mile Creek* (Alberta: approximately 38 km. SW of Rocky Mountain House; at the 45 mile point on the Dominion Telegraph Lines pack trail from Sunda Ranger Station to Swan Lake, in use in the 1930s, according to Aubrey, Harrion, & Karamitsanis 1991-6: I, p.91), and the *Twenty-Nine Mile Butte* (Coconino County, Arizona) marking a distance from Camp Verde.

Numbers of any size may occur in toponyms commemorating dates, marking times, or recalling a cattle brand. The *Forty-Niner Ridge* of New Mexico must somehow relate to the 1849 gold rush far away in California. The date of Captain Cook's arrival in an area of Queensland (Australia) explains the unusual name *Seventeen-Seventy*. The Yukon has a *Fourth of July Creek* and a *Twelfth of July Creek*, both marking dates when claims were staked, and Quebec has a *Lac du 17 décembre*. Many minor names in European cities commemorate the dates of historical events: French examples include the *Place du 14 juillet* in Bordeaux [storming of the Bastille, 1789], the *Rue du 4 septembre* in Aix-en-Provence [proclamation of 3rd Republic in 1870], and the *Place du 8 mai 45* in Montpellier [end of World War II]. Washington state has a *Ten O'Clock Creek*, so named (according to Hitchman 1985: 300) because "the mail carrier planned to reach this creek by ten o'clock in the morning to maintain his schedule." It is not clear today precisely what is alluded to by the time specified in the name of the *Rocher de Trois Heures* "three o'clock rock" (St-Geniès-de-Varensal, Hérault, France). *Twenty-Four Draw* (Apache County, Arizona) takes its name from the brand used early in the century by the 24 Land and Cattle Company; and the *Seventy-Four Draw* and *Seventy-Four Mountain* of New Mexico (Sierra and Grant Counties, respectively) have similar, though separate, origins.

What I regard as the most significant category of placenames including numbers refers to groupings of features that are natural (prominent mountains, rocks, trees, springs, etc.) or, much less commonly, man-made (houses, bridges, fields, etc.). Typical examples are: *Sevenoaks* (Kent, England), *Neuffontaines* (Nièvre, France), *Three Sisters* (mountains in

Oregon, and in New South Wales), *Three Bridges* (Sussex, England), *Five Cabin Creek* (British Columbia), *Les Quatre Pavillons* (suburbs of Bordeaux, France). The accompanying table shows the results of a partial survey of such groupings⁴ (limited to the sources included among the References to this article). No precise accuracy can be claimed for the totals indicated; these are, nevertheless, clear enough to indicate some definite trends.

If onomastic usage had merely and mechanically reflected the objective realities of our environment, one could have expected the frequency of occurrence of specific numbers to decline steadily and consistently as their magnitude increases: the landscape almost certainly includes fewer groupings of three trees, mountains, or houses than there are of two, and increasingly fewer of four, of five, and so on. The table below makes it obvious that this is not the case in toponymy, where established usage so often reflects conscious or unconscious preferences for one term over another. Some numbers, even within the same general order of magnitude, appear much more frequently than others. Some of the reasons for this kind of inconsistency can be recognized, but I have to admit that others escape me.

The mystical associations of three, seven, and nine are too well known to require explanation, and my tabulation is perhaps most striking in the way it shows these numbers to be favored in toponymy as in other circumstances. They seem, in fact, to be more favored in North America than in Europe. Overall, numerical groupings are far scarcer in the United Kingdom than they are in France. In discussing the Gloucestershire example of *Sevenhampton* (paralleled in Worcestershire, Wiltshire, and Somerset), A.H. Smith (1964-5: 178) uses evidence originally pointed out by Mawer and Stenton (1927: 36) to suggest "that seven units of property was the point at which much heavier fiscal burdens came into operation." If materialistic factors prevail here, this would seem not to be the case of the English examples of the types *Nine Wells* (Cambridgeshire, Westmorland) and *Sewell* (Bedfordshire), *Showell* (Oxfordshire), *Seawell*, *Sywell* (both in Northamptonshire) meaning "seven wells" (mentioned among other "holy well" names by Scherr 1990: 319). In France, too, springs or wells come toponymically in groups of seven, nine, or one hundred. Convention or mystical tradition probably also explains *Sevenoaks* in Kent, paralleled — as Ekwall points out (1964: 413) — by at least six examples of *Siebeneich* in Germany.

It will be noted that *ten* and *twelve*, though so often used for approximations in the ordinary speech of our own time, rarely occur in placenames. On the other hand, *forty* (paralleling various Biblical examples?) is more common than one might have expected.

At least at first sight, it is somewhat intriguing that *thirteen*, considered unlucky in France as elsewhere, is quite strongly represented in French names. More than half of the examples I have found come, however,

from the south of the country (Dordogne, Hérault, Savoie, Vendée), where *tres* is the normal dialect equivalent of *trois* 'three' and is easily corrupted into *treize* 'thirteen' by cartographers not familiar with the dialect forms. The type *Treize* [for *tres*] *vents*, i.e. "three winds," is quite widespread in southern France; and in coastal Languedoc, for instance, these three winds can be identified as the *cers* or *terral* [north-west], *grec* [east], and *marin* [south]. But five of the examples, from the *département* of Seine-Maritime, Normandy, cannot be so easily dismissed, especially as two of them have attestations from the 13th (*in monte tredecim ventorum* literally "on the hill of [the] thirteen winds,"⁵ Beaurepaire 1982-3: II, 667) and 16th (*les Treize fosses* "thirteen ditches," II: 991) centuries; we also have *Les Treize-Chênes* "thirteen oaks" and two examples of *Les Treize-acres* "thirteen acres."⁶

Other than multiples of ten, numbers larger than ten are much less common among those that refer to groups of natural or man-made features. The reference in *Eight and Forty*, a minor name at Blacktoft, East Riding of Yorkshire, England, is made clear by an 1828 record of this place as *Eight-and-forty-houses* (Smith 1937: 245). The number is presumably an exact reference to a small housing project of the Industrial Revolution. If the specific of Quebec's *Lac aux Cinquante-Six Roches* "lake of 56 rocks" is to be taken just as literally, it forms another major exception to the usual popular tendency to approximate.

Before we move to larger numbers, I invite the reader to reflect about an apparently unrelated question: the terms *centipede* and *millipede* might seem to imply that these creatures have one hundred and one thousand legs respectively — but how many legs do they *really* have? According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, there is no single answer: the numbers of centipedes' and millipedes' legs vary widely by group, by species, and even to some extent by individual. It appears that very many *centipedes* actually have to get along with no more than 28 legs, although one group (the *geophilomorpha*) may actually have as many as 177 leg-bearing segments (two legs per segment). Likewise, there are some *millipedes* that have something close to 400 legs — but very many more that have only about 70. By any strict standards, popular names like these are very poor approximations.

In the field of toponymy, we find several occurrences of the term *hundred* in U.K. names: in particular, Cambridgeshire has a few hundred-acre farms (where the measurement is presumably exact). In older British usage, also, *hundred* denotes an administrative division (originally 100 hides of land, a division of a shire having its own court). I have found a similar number of examples of *cent* in French, but hardly any in North America.

On this continent, on the other hand, *thousand* and its counterpart *mille* are both fairly common. As Gudde puts it in the relevant article of his work (1962: 320) "This number is used in geographical nomenclature as a

convenient expression for 'many':" he mentions *Thousand Island Lake* [Madera], *Thousand Lakes Primitive Area* [Shasta], *Thousand Oaks* [Ventura], *Thousand Palms* [Riverside], *Thousand Palms Canyon* [San Diego], and *Thousand Springs* [Shasta]. Similarly, referring to *Thousand Cave Mountain* (Apache county, Arizona), Granger (p.24) simply says: "Since there are numerous caves in this mountain, the name is descriptive." What is remarkable, therefore, about the name of the Ontario and New York *Thousand Islands* is not that the figure is imprecise, but rather that it comes very close to actual reality. In his *Canadian Geographic* article on the subject (1985: 88), Alan Rayburn says that he has reached a total of 1,149 by a methodological check of large-scale navigational charts, but cites an even closer figure of 1,015 from a 1966 official count. Among other examples, we may cite the *Valley of a Thousand Falls* in the Cariboo District of B.C., the *Thousand Rocks* of Newfoundland, and the *Lac des Mille Bouches* and *Circonscription électorale des Mille-Iles* of Quebec. In practical terms, *thousand* (or *mille*) seems to be used in placenames wherever there is a such an abundance of rocks, or watercourses, or islands that most people would not even attempt to count them.

I am aware of only one name that includes a number exceeding a thousand: *Million Cove*, south of Hare Bay, Newfoundland.

One of the factors influencing the adoption of a given expression into toponymic usage is, of course, its distinctiveness. An ordinary crossroads is a meeting place for roads going in four directions, and this is clearly the explanation of several examples of *Les Quatre Chemins* in the *département* of Hérault (France), as it is of *Four Corners*, a village in Maryland (Kenny 1984: 91). A meeting point for roads going in *more* than four directions is much less usual — and therefore much more likely to be reflected in microtoponymy. I am familiar with crossroads named *Five Ways* both in Birmingham and in Shanklin (England), paralleled for example by *Cinq Chemins* (Pinet, Hérault, France), and by *Five Points* (Fresno County, California).

In earlier periods of European history, when there were few made-up roads, a road junction that was not actually a crossroads often gave its site to a settlement (such as a market town), that sometimes came to be known by a name designating the junction itself. In southern France there are quite a few names derived, more or less indirectly, from Latin *trivium* "road junction," where the first element *tri-* has the meaning of "three." A clear case is that of [*St-Mathieu-de-*] *Trévièrs*, Hérault (France), while about 70 km west of there we find *La Trivalle* (*commune* of Mons, in the same *département*) "three valleys," where the river Jaur joins the Orb. This, of course, is paralleled by the most obvious of Canadian placenames that include a number: *Trois-Rivières*, Quebec, where the Saint-Maurice enters the Saint-Lawrence.

Three or its equivalent is often found in the names of points at or near where the boundaries of three jurisdictions meet. As such boundaries tend to follow watersheds and high ground in general, these may also be notable viewpoints, as in the case of the *Mont des Trois Terres* situated at what was at one time the meeting-point of the former jurisdictions of Béziers, Albi, and Rodez (France). On the other hand, *Three Shires* on the boundary of the parish of Marshfield (Gloucestershire, England) where Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, and Somerset meet, is merely a field name (Smith 1964-5: iii, 61). More rarely, even four jurisdictions meet at one point. In England, this was the case of the counties of Gloucester, Oxford, Warwick, and Worcester until about 200 years ago. Their former boundaries met at the *Four Shire Stone* (Evenlode, Gloucestershire), a site originally marked by four stones, as recorded by a 10th-century document (Smith 1964-5: I, 219). The only place in the United States where four states (New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, and Arizona) meet is known as *Four Corners* (San Juan, New Mexico).

It will be seen first, that the use of numbers in names is considerably greater than one might previously have suspected and second, that similar patterns appear in widely different places and times, and third, that - as with all naming - the numbers included in names are not chosen at random. Pure numbers belong to the fields of mathematics and statistics; but the words by which those numbers are designated are themselves linguistic entities. When these words are taken over from the linguistic to the onomastic sphere, their semantic value is precise and remains transparent in some cases. More often, however, it has become a reminder of a reality that has changed or disappeared in the course of time - and sometimes also of the modes of expression that prevailed in pre-technological times which did not share our present age's preoccupation with numerical precision.

Notes

1. A preliminary version of this article was given at the 1993 meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Names (Carleton University).
2. Passing reference to a handful of English-language examples is made in Lin, Millward, & Zhu 1983: 36-37.
3. The street numbering system formed part of William Penn's original plan from which the city of Philadelphia began to take its shape in 1683 (Coolidge 1887: 51). His choice of the grid plan - traditional in military establishments since Roman times - was influenced by its use, from 1677, in Burlington, New Jersey (Snyder 1975: 16). I have been able to ascertain neither whether Burlington's early streets were also numbered nor whether this austere mode of designation was expressly intended to conform to the Quakers' aim of simplicity in all things.
4. I estimate that, for each of the four categories distinguished in this table, the total corpus from which examples were extracted includes

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between 100,000 and 200,000 names. With the aim of eliminating arbitrary elements from the table, the following types of example were excluded from the collection of data: ordinal numbers, *Twin*, distances and times, (e.g., *Fifteen Minute Lake*, Nova Scotia, *Twelve O'Clock Harbour*, Labrador), sequential indications (*Seventy-four Mile Creek*, British Columbia; *48 Road*, Prince Edward Island), prices (e.g., *Seven Pence Ha'Penny Brook*, Nova Scotia), dates (*Lac du 17 décembre*, Québec). Name clusters have been counted as single items.

5. But, as is so often the case in this period, this latinization probably reflects a misinterpretation of the French name's actual origin and/or significance.

6. Seine-Maritime also has some other atypical numbers: *Les 18 Acres* (4 examples), *les 18 Mines* (1 example), *les 18 Arbres* (1 example).

Numbers in Placenames: Groups of Natural or Man-made Features

	U.K.	English Speaking North America	Québec	France
1	-	5	-	-
2	11	58	37	34
3	16	102	134	131
4	16	18	54	101
5	4	29	15	20
6	3	3	13	11
7	12	24	24	31
8	-	2	1	2
9	7	9	1	23
10	2	2	1	6
11	-	-	2	3
12	-	1	2	3
13	-	-	-	14
14	-	-	2	1
15	-	3	4	2
16	1	-	2	1
17	-	-	-	-
18	-	1	-	-
19	-	-	-	-
20	4	1	1	6
30	1	-	2	4
40	6	1	3	6
50	2	3	-	1
60	-	1	1	-
70	-	-	-	-

80	-	-	-	-
90	-	-	-	-
100	9	1	1	7
1000	-	10	10	2
1,000,000	-	1	-	-

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