

Structure and Controversy: What Names Authorities Adjudicate

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To deal with proposals for new placenames and to arbitrate disputes over existing names, state names agencies have adopted a variety of methods and structures, ranging from large committees to individuals, to make recommendations to the Domestic Names Committee of the United States Board on Geographic Names. These authorities have often found themselves involved in controversy. In recent years the concern has been over the use of derogatory names, especially names containing the word "squaw," and states have approached this problem in various ways. Of longer standing concern are commemorative names, and authorities have to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of naming features on the landscape for individuals.

This article was originally prepared for the first meeting of the newly formed Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA) in Spokane, Washington, in September 1999. The new name, which replaces the Western States Geographic Names Council, recognizes that eastern states have names and naming problems as well as western states. I have attempted, therefore, to look at typical issues facing names authorities all across the United States. To do this, I sent either a letter or an e-mail message to at least one representative of most of the state names authorities, using the January 1999 *State Board List*, compiled by the United States Board on Geographic Names. According to this list, nine of the fifty states have no board or contact person. For one reason or another, I did not send a letter to five other states. From the remaining thirty-six to which I did write, I received eighteen responses, a return of 50%.

I wanted to put these issues in something of a historical context and thus have relied heavily on the excellent though still unpublished *Diary of Actions, Policies and Events, 1890-1990* (1994), which Don Orth compiled and which he has so graciously lent me. Over the years I have

relied heavily on Don's wisdom, both in his writing and in informal conversation, as have so many others who work with names, and it is a great honor to be included in this issue of *Names* that recognizes his many contributions to name study in the United States and beyond.

One thing that becomes clear in an exercise like this is the wide variety of ways the states structure their names boards. In many cases the board is a function of state government, for example in Washington under the Commissioner of Public Lands and in Minnesota in the Department of Natural Resources. In other cases, the authority rests with state historical or archive agencies, as in Alaska, Arizona, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Utah, to list but a few. The Oregon board is part of the state historical society, which is, I understand, a semi-private organization with state support. In some cases, the names authority belongs to a state geological survey (Alabama, Delaware, Oklahoma) or to a state transportation department (Connecticut, Maryland). Finally, in some states the authority seems to fall upon interested individuals, as in South Dakota, where I, an English professor, am the self-appointed authority, or in North Dakota, where the authority is a multitalented gynecologist.

The foregoing list oversimplifies. Some states have boards representing a number of agencies. California, for example, lists members from departments of water resources, natural heritage, mines and geology, forestry and fire protection, fish and game, historical societies, and resources. My feeling is that boards representing a broad spectrum of interests may be desirable. Wayne Furr suggests that a board comprising several agencies may have more authority than one that comes from a single agency, as in his state of Oklahoma, where he has the problem of city, county, and state agencies, as well as the state legislature, renaming features without consulting the geographic names board, of which he is a part.

With such a variety of structures, it is hard to generalize about how state authorities go about their business. It would also be hard to know what is going on in other states were it not for the close coordination between these authorities and the Domestic Names Committee (DNC) of the U.S. Board, which has the final say on what names will appear on federal maps or in federal documents. Through the minutes of its monthly meetings and through the annual joint meetings between the DNC and COGNA, we are able to find out what kinds of issues and problems other states are facing.

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In my contacts with names authorities I have learned that many states have experienced similar problems or faced similar cases in naming or renaming proposals, and for this paper I have selected a few examples from those reported to me, focusing my attention on two especially troublesome areas: derogatory names and commemorative names.

Policy 5 of the DNC's *Principles, Policies and Procedures* states that "the U.S. Board on Geographic Names will not adopt a name for Federal usage that is determined by the Board to be derogatory to a particular racial or ethnic group, gender, or religious group" (Orth and Payne 1997, 19). As early as 1962, the DNC, at the urging of Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, approved a draft policy regarding the use of the word "nigger" in geographic names. The policy stated that the Board would not approve any name with this word. More important was the requirement that all such names then on any federal map or document would be "modified" at the next publication. This meant that a different name would have to be found and in effect erased the word "nigger" from the placename cover of the United States (Orth 1994, 187). In 1974, a similar action by the DNC eliminated the word "Jap" from federal documents (Orth 1994, 215).

The DNC's policy manual recognizes that "attitudes and perceptions of words considered to be pejorative vary between individuals and can change connotation from one generation to another" (USBGN 1997, 18). This statement acknowledges that names deemed derogatory at one time may not be so in another and anticipates the feeling shared by many that to change a name that has been used for a long time is to rewrite history. Phil Lord of New York's board raises an important issue: changing names for any reason creates a discontinuity for historical researchers in the same way that surname changes cause a discontinuity for genealogists. "As an historian," he states, "I am concerned about the automatic elimination of names that someone thinks are derogatory." Lord recognizes that with certain names, like "nigger," "historical continuity...must be sacrificed to social sensitivity" (Lord 1999). Names authorities must find a way to balance the competing claims of human respect and historical continuity.

The main issue of this sort facing boards at the moment, as William Bright (2000b) discusses in this issue of *Names*, is the "s" word: "squaw." The first two states that took legislative action, Minnesota and Montana, had to face the problem of implementing the legislation. The

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1995 law in Minnesota required all “squaw” names to be changed by July 31, 1996, and seventeen of the twenty were changed by that time. Two counties in northern Minnesota resisted the change, citing the argument of historical continuity or, cynically perhaps, holding out against what they perceived to be “politically correct” (Yakel 1999a). However, by September 1999 all of the “squaw” names had been replaced by names acceptable to all affected parties in that state.

In Montana, the legislation, passed in 1999, calls for an advisory group to deal with the mandated changes, but it is still too early to predict how this group will respond, according to Don Howard. Before the group’s first meeting, a proposal came forward to change Squaw Butte and its nearby Squaw Coulee, in Hill County, to Indian Woman Butte and Indian Woman Coulee. The county commissioners agreed, but the owner of the land on which the features are located came forward to complain that he had not been consulted about this change. He does not resist the change; he just wants a say in what the name should be. He claims, says Don Howard, that if he cannot continue to use the current name because of the [legislative mandate] . . . , he should at the very least have something to say as to the renaming of the butte and coulee, because he owns it” (Howard 1999).

In early 2000, two other states took on the “squaw” names issue. The legislature in Maine passed a bill, which the governor signed, to replace all such names (Maine 2000, 5A), and in South Dakota, the governor announced that he would introduce a bill in the next session of the legislature to do the same thing (Woster 2000, A:1, 6).

Other states have taken action on the “squaw” issue on a case-by-case basis. In California, David Wagner (1999) wrote, the Resources Agency Advisory Committee recommended that Squaw Gulch in Siskiyou County be changed to Taritsi Gulch. According to William Bright (2000a), *taritsi* is derived from *taríc'i'*, which means ‘woman’ in the extinct Shasta language. The county board of supervisors did not support the change, but the California and U.S. boards did (USBGN 1997, 7). Wagner points out that there are 105 squaw names in California. The best known of these is Squaw Valley, and any consideration to change that name is a “potentially explosive issue” (1999).

What is seen as derogatory by some people is not limited to “squaw.” In Minnesota, Glen Yakel is facing a proposal from a Native American to change the name of the Rum River, the outlet for Mille

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Lacs Lake. The proponent has learned that the original Sioux name for the river was *wakan*, their word for 'spirit'. The Rum River, according to Warren Upham's 1920 Minnesota placename study (1969), is a rather cynical pun on spirits. The proponent believes that "rum" is a word derogatory to Indians because "the consumption of rum has brought misery and ruin to many Indians." Yakel is offering advice to the proponent, but has little hope that the name will be changed. (Yakel 1999a; 2000)

The DNC has so far not shown any interest in making a global change for "squaw" or any other names, as it did with "nigger" and "Jap." Even the attempted elimination of the offensive "n" word has not solved all the problems. In the early 1990s, in South Carolina, a Marion County resident noticed that the name *Nigger Lake Run* still appeared on a USGS 7.5 minute quadrangle of that region, a map published since 1962 (the year the DNC stated that such names would no longer appear on new maps). Also, the then current Marion County highway map, published by the South Carolina Department of Transportation, carried the name. According to Tom Vose (1999), the name had been changed to Lone Pine Lake in 1993 (USBGN 1996, 15). In Pennsylvania, a proponent urged that a mountain range in Somerset County, Negro Mountain (which had been renamed in 1962), be renamed *Black Hero Mountain* to honor black Congressional Medal of Honor recipients. The change was not approved (Beyer 1999).

Sometimes the broad definition of "derogatory" can surprise us. Phil Lord wrote that a woman called his office and asked to have a derogatory name removed from a USGS map in her community. She was objecting to the generic "swamp" (Lord 1999).

Commemorative names, those which honor an individual or a group with a name on the landscape, have been a problem throughout the entire history of the DNC, although its reasonably clear policies in recent years have made enforcement somewhat easier for names authorities. Requiring that a person be dead for five years has helped cool the emotions when a popular citizen or family member dies, yet stories abound of efforts to honor the living and the recently deceased.

In Minnesota, in the summer of 1999, a group of interested citizens in Douglas County submitted a petition to give the name *Little Lake Greta* to a small lake officially described as "Unnamed Lake #320." The intent was to honor Greta Arnstein, who all her life had swum and

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canoed in this lake. The petitions convinced the county commissioners to schedule a public hearing for June 22, 1999, and then write to Glen Yakel's office urging him to hurry the process because Greta was about to graduate from high school. When he sent them a copy of the commemorative naming policy, the hearing was cancelled and the matter was dropped (Yakel 1999a).

Phil Lord (1999) reported an interesting case in New York. A Mr. Orr lived on an island and wanted it named for himself. He knew about the prohibition against naming a feature for a living person, so he asked that the island be named Oar Island, claiming that when they first set foot there, an old boat oar was washed up on shore. The New York board voted against the proposal, and Mr. Orr did not get his "Oar Island."

The prohibition against honoring living persons has not always been policy, and even today Congress, whose naming prerogative takes precedence over that of the U.S. Board, reserves the right to honor still-living individuals, as witness the change of name of Washington National Airport to Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, or the naming of a reservoir for Senator Strom Thurmond, as I discuss below. In 1906, the policy statement reads that "Names of living persons should be applied very rarely, and only those of great eminence should be thus honored" (Orth 1994, 34). The 1906 policy stretches the definition of eminence, it seems to me, when it encourages the perpetuation of names of "eminent men now dead..., especially those of early explorers, naturalists, geologists, topographers, etc."

Once the question of whether to commemorate a person has been resolved, another question often arises as to the appropriateness of the feature to the person being honored. The DNC faced this problem in 1945, when there was a rush to honor Franklin D. Roosevelt, who died in April of that year. The DNC formulated a policy to cover naming for future presidents as well as Roosevelt. One of the policies is that "features of less than heroic proportions would be considered only if the late President was associated directly with the feature in some way" (Orth 1994, 125-26). The relationship between feature and person honored concerned Jim Trumbly of the California board, as in the hypothetical case of "naming a major peak for John Doe or a small pond for Winston Churchill." Trumbly cited two cases approved by the U.S. Board, one honoring a National Forest Service employee. Both features are of national importance, he claims, a peak in a national park and a

waterfall in a national scenic area. "I feel we should be especially conservative in such matters when they involve public employees," Trumbly wrote (1999).

The matter of commemoration is frequently tied up with wilderness naming policy, which discourages applying names to any feature within an officially designated wilderness area (USBGN 1997, 17-18). David Wagner (1999) wrote me of a problematic case in Alpine County, California. Thornburg Peak, which commemorates William Thornburg (1849-1912), is a name that has been used locally for over one hundred years, though it is not on federal maps. "It is one of the most prominent landmarks in the western skyline viewed from [the town of] Markleeville," but it is just inside the boundaries of the Mokelumne Wilderness of the Toiyabe National Forest. The California Resources Agency Advisory Committee and the Alpine County supervisors favored making the name official, but the U.S. Forest Service was opposed. In this case, the DNC went with the local group and approved the name, and the U.S. Board agreed (USBGN 1998, 1).

When it comes to really significant individuals, the rules often do not apply. When Franklin D. Roosevelt died, the very next day the Board voted to approve the recommendation of the Commission of Reclamation to name the reservoir behind Grand Coulee Dam in the state of Washington Franklin D. Roosevelt Lake.

A much more recent case is that of a reservoir on the Savannah River, which forms the boundary between South Carolina and Georgia. This reservoir was originally named Clarks Hill Lake, and on the Georgia highway map still is, but by Congressional action it is now officially J. Strom Thurmond Lake. Thurmond, the oldest senator in U.S. history, is still alive. As Tom Vose of the South Carolina Department of Transportation puts it, "What is the solution to the re-naming of a lake that is on the South Carolina-Georgia state line and the ungrateful Georgians refuse to recognize the new name for the lake on their side of the line." Here is an issue that touches on commemoration, local control, and border disputes.

These are only a few examples of the kinds of issues that names authorities must adjudicate. Names and name controversies in the United States have a long tradition, and no doubt there will be many more difficult but interesting cases to resolve in the future.

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