

# United States and Canada: Partners in Geographic Names Standardization

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The United States and Canada have each had their own strong national geographic names authorities since the end of the nineteenth century. Toponymic issues each authority addresses are often similar, and cooperation between the two countries on geographical names topics would appear to be of value to both. From Canadian records, the main areas of common interest and exchange during the past century are examined, with particular reference being made to the naming of transboundary features.

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## The Early Days

Strange as it may seem, the United States naming process was itself largely responsible for the establishment of the original Geographic Board of Canada in 1897. The survey work of Lt. Frederick Schwatka in the Yukon River basin in the early 1880s had raised Canadian eyebrows when the resulting United States Coast and Geodetic Survey map of Alaska and adjacent regions became available. Schwatka had applied “entirely new names to features which were well known and had already been named by miners” [as well as by aboriginal peoples] (ADLS 1888). In 1890 the United States established its Geographic Names Board to authorize toponymy for federal use. At this time the Canadian government stalled on taking a similar step, and so naming features in the Canadian West continued to proliferate, with orthographic and locational ambiguity. Almost desperately, in 1892 Canadian Surveyor-General E.G.D. Deville lamented that as a result of such government inaction “and in order to prevent confusion in their publications, the United States Board is now ruling upon Canadian names” (GBC 1898). His memorandum detailed the need for Canada to exercise responsibility for rulings which were being adopted by geographers around the world. Finally in December 1897, Canada took

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its place with the United States in having a names authority responsible for standardizing toponymic nomenclature for national and international use.

Cooperation between the two geographic names boards has formed an underlying framework for the administration of toponymy in North America during the twentieth century. It has ranged from naming transboundary features, to discussions on themes of common interest, and to collaboration on United Nations issues of geographic names standardization.

### Naming Transboundary Features—The First Steps

In the early handwritten minutes of the Geographic Board of Canada (GBC), reference to the United States Board on Geographic Names (USBGN) appears quite frequently. On a regular basis annual reports of the GBC were sent to the USBGN and one sees the enthusiasm south of the border, expressing “pleasure at the prospect of the two Boards working in harmony to establish a consistent and uniform nomenclature...” (GBC 1900), in this case referring particularly to the northwest parts of the North American continent. Most references to the USBGN in the GBC minutes refer to names of boundary features. Some existing instances of non-agreement were discussed: Kootenay vs. Kootenai; Okanagan vs. Okanogan; Chippawa vs. Chippewa; Juan de Fuca Strait vs. Strait of Juan de Fuca.... Such differences live on, reflecting local usage in both countries. However, cooperation was evident in naming many of the peaks, rivers, etc. as the International Boundary Commission made its detailed surveys of the border. Gremlins in the process did occur, as evidenced by minor wrangles over naming a peak for either Quincy Adams or for Lester Jones (GBC 1923). By the mid 1920s, however, each board was submitting to the other name proposals for boundary features, prior to decision making. Hence, names, such as those of surveyors and statesmen William Ogilvie, Fremont Morse, Thomas Fawcett, Henry Clay, and George Canning, proposed for mountains on the British Columbia/Alaska border, received assent from both authorities.

General cooperation between the two boards continued over the years, although by the 1960s, Canada had moved away from a federal decision-making process, handing over the responsibilities to the provincial governments, and later, in the 1980s, to the territorial governments.

Naming Transboundary Features—Towards a Document of Understanding

In 1984 the USBGN set up the Subcommittee on Boundary Names. Its first aim was to work with Canada to identify areas of concern and to establish procedures that could later be discussed with the Mexican names authority. The focus was on existing name differences for features, processing submissions for change, and treatment of name proposals for unnamed features. Border states and provinces/territories provided their input and a joint United States/Canada meeting was held at the Kempenfelt Conference Centre, near Barrie, Ontario, November 29-30, 1984. The six participants from the United States were R.E. Ehrenberg, C.E. Harrington, S.M. Lang, J.T. Olsson, D.J. Orth and J.M. Torres, and the six from Canada were F. Beaudin, I.K. Ganton, A.C. McEwen, C.T. Osborne, A. Rayburn, and M.B. Smart. Presentation and discussion of working papers resulted in detailed recommendations for handling names of transboundary features for submission to the names authorities of both countries (CPCGN 1984).

In Canada, members at the next meeting of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (CPCGN) questioned the basic premise of standardization, when cultural heritage is compromised to produce economies on maps. Rather it was expressed that maps should reflect and preserve cultural reality, and if usage on each side of the border is different, this should be respected. After lengthy reworking of the recommendations, the Document of Understanding was signed by the chairs of both national names authorities in August 1989. By then, it included: Coordination in the naming of transboundary features; Name changing; Generic and feature class terminology; Implementation; International Boundary Commission mapping program; and an appendix including procedures for handling transboundary names and a form for this purpose (CPCGN 1989b). During the interim years a project had been undertaken in Canada, creating a compendium of some 900 features on or crossing the border, officially named by one or both national authorities, and shown on national topographic maps. The resulting document (CPCGN 1989a) shows that approximately 60% of the features have matching names, about 30% are features named on one side of the border only, and of the remainder some have names with spelling variations or with differing English/French generics, but only about 3% have completely different names. Eldorado Creek, Washington ~ Lomond Creek, British Columbia and Stearns Brook, Vermont ~ Ruisseau Bachelor, Quebec are examples of official use of completely different names.

### Cooperation Through the United Nations and Internal Meetings

Within the context of the United Nations, toponymic experts from the United States and Canada have cooperated in furthering geographical names standardization since the 1960s, through activities of the United States/Canada Division, by combined efforts on working groups and by joint participation in seminars and discussion groups. Following in the footsteps of Dr. Meredith (Pete) Burrill, a key participant in the early meetings, both countries have contributed officers for the Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names and sessions of the United Nations Group of Experts, including: R.E. Flynn, H. Frieswyk, J. T. Gissendanner, C.M. Heyda, R.D. Hodgson, T.J. Liard, D.J. Orth, C.R. Page, R.L. Payne, G. Quinting, R.R. Randall, S.H. Shaw, E.A. Stoneman, and A.J. Wraight from the United States, and F. Beaudin, G.F. Delaney, H. Dorion, J.-P. Drolet, L. Fillion, J.K. Fraser, E.S. Holmgren, H. Kerfoot, J. Poirier, A. Rayburn, J.B. Rudnycky, Y. Slavutych, and M.B. Smart from Canada.

Over the years, geographic names representatives have participated in each other's board meetings. During the past few decades, these forums for improved understanding of common toponymic problems have become more regular, particularly at annual meetings of the CPCGN (since March 2000, the Geographical Names Board of Canada), and the Western States Geographic Names Conference (since September 1998, the Council of Geographic Names Authorities). Cooperation between the two countries was highlighted at the centennial celebrations of the USBGN in 1990 and the CPCGN in 1997.

### CPCGN Recognition of USBGN Cooperation

In honor of the USBGN centenary in 1990, the CPCGN published a special issue of *Canoma* (16.1). Seventeen items addressed common bonds in geographic naming. Articles visited questions of transboundary feature naming: historical cartography of the border, mapping the 49th Parallel in the West, Saskatchewan and Manitoba features shared with the United States, and Ontario/New York names of the Thousand Islands and Niagara Region. Other articles presented Canadian toponyms with U.S. connections: American presidents and International Boundary Commission surveyors remembered, American names in Quebec, and New York businessman Fenley Hunter naming Virginia Falls on the South Nahanni River in the Northwest Territories. A special toponymic event was the naming of Lac U.S.A., 65 km west of the city of Baie-

Comeau (Quebec) on the northern shore of the St. Lawrence River. The Commission de toponymie du Québec had formalized this designation for a lake resembling the outline of the part of the United States south of the 49th Parallel.

*Canoma*, produced twice yearly by the CPCGN since 1975, includes other material emphasizing links between the names authorities of Canada and the United States. Two symposia on the Automation of Geographical Names were held in Ottawa in the 1980s. The USBGN was at the time going through a similar program (yet with a different approach) to create digital toponymic records. On both occasions, U.S. presentations were valuable contributions to the workshops, and *Canoma* included items by D.J. Orth, W.E. Opalski and S.A. Kingsbury in 1980 and R.L. Payne in 1985. Other articles in *Canoma*, for example, surveying the boundary of the St. Croix River (*Canoma* 9.1) and names along the Alaska Highway (*Canoma* 18.2), indicated the continuing interest that the CPCGN had in border topics.

#### Appreciation

On the occasion of this festschrift for Don Orth, we recognize an individual who for over twenty years was instrumental in preserving a continuing atmosphere of cooperation between toponymic authorities in Canada and the United States. He has worked with us on many subjects: aboriginal naming issues, data base development, establishment of national names authorities in developing countries, to name but a few, and he has always given much support and encouragement, which will undoubtedly provide the impetus for continued cooperation in the twenty-first century. As noted in *Canoma* on the occasion of the USBGN 100th anniversary: "If toponymy can bring us all closer together and help us in understanding better the concerns and aspirations of the peoples of the world, we are indeed building a strong foundation for future generations, while at the same time preserving a part of our cultural heritage for them to enjoy" (Kerfoot 1990).

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