How to Study Placenames

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The following presents instructions on how to properly study placenames. Beginning by assembling a list of placenames one then must decide what they want to know about each name. A list of information that is desired for each placename is enumerated, ranging from the spelling to the historical circumstance of the naming. A classification system is then presented for the names on the basis of the names themselves rather than the purposes for naming. The classification system ranges from personal names to mistake names and underived names where no known derivations can be found. One has a plethora of local and national sources to consult in finding a place or feature name. These range from historical maps and the U.S. Postal Service to county records and local residents. By investigating these sources one avoids name sources that are simply widely respected local lore and not properly evaluated historical fact.

One can approach the study of placenames from the perspective of place or name. If the latter, he should begin by examining current and historic maps and other documents—official/public and unofficial—from which he would prepare a list of place and feature names. Then he must decide what he would like to know about each name, the place or feature it identifies, and its meaning as it was applied to that place or feature.

[Throughout these instructions I'll be distinguishing "place" and "feature." For our purposes a "place" is a human settlement of some kind—a community (city, town, village, hamlet) of definite geographic limits and concentrated populations, or an unfocused (usually rural) neighborhood of several acres or even square miles. A "feature" is a natural element (stream, lake, elevation, etc.) or a number of "man-made" elements (mill, mine, school, church, cemetery, building complex, camp, station (rail or pioneer), landing, etc.]

A couple of preliminary advisories: (1) A distinction must be made between the kind of name (or the name itself)

and its application to the particular place or feature it identifies. We call this "denotation vs. connotation." A "denotative" name tells us about its referent: it's obvious; it's descriptive of the place or feature, at least to the people who lived there or owned it. A "connotative" name is associated with the place or feature solely by its application. It would not be obvious to an outsider and tells us nothing about the place or feature.

(2) Simplistic explanations should be avoided. There's no substitute for empirical validation. That is, empirical validation is preferable to assumptions, logical or otherwise. Or to put it another way, name derivations are not always what they seem. Some names that seem to tell a good story may well have had a more mundane origin. While *Helechawa* sounds like a diatribe about lousy road conditions this, Wolfe County, Kentucky hamlet was actually named by a railroad builder for his mother. And *Miracle*, *Wisdom*, *Allegree*, *Ogle*, *Tongs*, *Goodnight*, and *Jolly*, settlements in other parts of Kentucky, were all named for local families. *Mousie* honored the younger daughter of a local landowner. *Canada*, as a post office in Pike County and a stream in Wayne County (both in Kentucky) were not named for the country but for local families who may also have been known as Kennedy. *Maud* was named for a horse. (I had a dickens of a time dissuading a young lady from spending her summer vacation checking area genealogies for this one. She was convinced it was named for her aunt who had once lived somewhere in that area.) *Awe* was someone's initials, not the breathtaking scenery. Nor should one attribute a name to a certain referent simply because that referent gave rise to that name somewhere else. (I had an even worse time convincing an "authority" on Indian names that *Comargo*, a coal town in McCreary County, was not named for the chief of a legendary tribe who had led his people to this site after the treaty of Sycamore Shoals. Like Helechawa who, according to the same authority, was an Indian maiden or Tecumseh's brother [take your pick], it was

an acronym for the town's three developers, Coleman, Marlowe, and Gorham.) In short, nothing is or should be merely obvious in placename study.

The Kinds of Information Desired For Each Placename
[This is an ideal goal which will never be fully realized but definitely to be strived for.]

1. The current (or official) spelling and any known spelling variation, and the date (if known) that each came into common use. If the name identifies a place or feature that's no longer in existence, the last known spelling should be sought.

2. The current approved local pronunciation of the name and any variations in pronunciation since the name was first applied to the place or feature (and the kinds of persons these vocal patterns identify). If the place no longer exists what was its last known pronunciation? Pronunciations should be given in the context of everyday conversation.

3. The kind of geographic feature identified by the name (we call these "designator terms"):

a. Populated places: cities, towns, villages, any settlements with distinct boundaries; rural neighborhoods with indistinct boundaries and no population concentrations; populated hollows; suburban or other residential developments (excluding longtime sections or neighborhoods of towns or cities).

b. Waterways: including flowing, intermittent, and disappearing streams of all kinds (identified by the generics river, creek, fork, run, branch, brook, prong, etc.); lakes and ponds, marshes, sloughs, bayous, stretches, bends, valleys, and unpopulated hollows.

c. Natural terrain: hills, knobs, knolls, mountains; ridges and ranges; passes, cols, and gaps; stream bottoms and hollows, flats.

d. Miscellaneous man-made features: schools, churches, cemeteries, mines, railroad stations (as such) and sidings, canals, camps, parks, dams, bridges, roads, airfields,

farms, fish hatcheries, historic sites and monuments, pioneer stations and trading posts, triangulation points.

      e. Post Offices that don't serve populated places as such but merely rural neighborhoods (and they may not share the same name. Many offices bear names different from the communities they serve to avoid the U.S. Post Office Department's long time directive of no more than one post office with a certain name in any state at any one time.) Post offices were usually established at convenient places to serve a local population. Some of the earliest were shipping points on a stream and stagecoach stopping points. Many early office names ending in Store, Station, Wharf, Ferry, Mill, Cross Roads, etc., tell us the kind of places they were located at or served. Many times communities grew up around their offices, taking their names.

      In short, anything at all with a name, past and present, should be surveyed. Keep in mind that many post offices had more than one name during their operations. It's necessary that the designator term be given for each named place or feature since a name can be applied to different geographic elements: settlement, stream, school, church, etc. And the kind of feature isn't always identified by the generic (if there is one, and there may not be with most populated places and post offices). And don't assume too much of generics: e.g., "Fork" and "Branch" are often used interchangeably in Kentucky along with "Creek" and "Run" and "Lake" and "Pond." And the double generic is quite common in eastern Kentucky and throughout the Appalachian region.

      4. The precise location and spatial range of the place or feature and any changes in its location (usually the case with post offices). Location can be determined by direction and distance (by road, stream, or air miles) from some prominent identifiable feature in the county (the mouth of a major stream or the county seat or principal town). If a stream, give its several known sources (keeping in mind that, in mountainous areas, these are highly fluctuant), its direction of "flow" (many

streams don't flow at all in dry weather), and length (in miles), and its mouth (empties into such-and-such stream, lake, the Gulf of Mexico, sea, or ocean) and at what point, as well as its location relative to other places or features. Include other ways of physically describing the place or feature—by appearance, size, shape, etc., so it can't be confused with any other place or feature with the same or similar name. (There are several hundred streams in Kentucky, even some short ones, that have more than one tributary called Mill something). The use of geographic coordinates is fine if one knows how to compute these. Most people, including GNIS types, don't.

5. The date, if known, on which the name was first applied to the place or feature, or else its earliest known date of use. For a place or feature no longer in existence, the date of its abandonment and the last known use of the name. If the above information is not available, the date of the earliest reference to the name on a map or in a record or publication should be given. Dates of name changes or changes in the form, spelling, or pronunciation of the name, if known, should also be given.

6. The degree or level of a name's use. That is, is the name widely known or is its use limited to official records, with the place locally identified by some other name? What other name?

7. The historical circumstances of the naming including, if known, the identity of the namer(s), the reason(s) for their choice of name, and its source, and the events which led to the choice of this name for that place or feature at that time.

If the name is derived from that of a person or family, an event, another place, or some descriptive or characteristic of the place or feature or its population, information should be secured about the referent. If a personal name that person or family's association with the particular place or feature it identifies, or to the namers, should be traced. If named for a person or family: e.g., early settler, landowner, discoverer,

founder, etc., his (their) full name should be given, along with demographic particulars, residence (current address if still alive), whence he had come to the area (if he's not native to it), occupation, etc., in short, any information that would suggest his association with the place/feature or to its namer. (Information about him (or them) may be secured through a check of Census or tax records, land deeds, etc., in the courthouse or state archives, or similar library holdings. We can't overlook the possibility of "imported names." Many names may have been brought to a place by early settlers from a previous residence. This would include another placename or family name which might explain why the name source can't be traced locally or have any local significance.

Stream names were often transferred to other features in the vicinity. As Ramsay and other early placename investigators have reminded us, streams were usually the first features to be named by early settlers. Then villages, schools, churches, etc., were given their names. But we must be careful here since each may refer to different members of a family or even, by coincidence, to others of the same name. (Some names were very common in some areas.)

Ramsay also reminded us that the Post Office Department's long standing rule of not duplicating a name was often "evaded" by using the name source's given name, a nickname, or hometown, or by some combination of names or parts of names: Maryhelen, Arthurmable, Jonancy, Jackandy, Trevlac.

Some names were chosen for sentimental, aspirational, or humorous reasons or had a literary, religious, or "high cultural" source. If so, the reason or source should be given and specific references should be cited: chapter and verse, date and name of literary work, etc.

Note: One should trust to pronunciation rather than spelling as clue's to a name's explanation which is why recording the former is so important.

Note: For years the U.S. Post Office Department followed the practice of asking petitioners to furnish a list of names from which a new office's name would be selected, and the Department would choose the name from that list. Occasionally a name would be suggested by a Department clerk or inspector and accepted since no other seemed acceptable.

Sometimes name investigators will come across "ex post facto" accounts by local residents or others for names that seem to defy all attempts at explanation. These are often accepted locally and circulated with great sincerity. There may also be popular accounts for names that otherwise have been verified. In any case, these accounts may be interesting or useful for what they can tell us about those who have circulated them. If possible, one should learn how widely circulated and accepted they have been. And we can't rule out the possibility that some popular account (even those that sound like stories) are legitimate sources of name derivations. That is, sometimes stories are a natural form of naming. So one must be careful about discounting a seemingly ex-post-facto explanation without justification (e.g., Whoopflares in Owsley County, Ky. or Hell For Certain in Leslie Co.)

8. Other names currently or previously borne by a place or feature and the reasons and dates for each change of name. Even if one is approaching the study of an area's placenames by name rather than place, he should record all the names of a particular place or feature in chronological order, making a separate record for each name and securing the above information for each. One might also record proposed names for certain features (especially post offices) that were disallowed in favor of another name, and why. Name changes don't always have to be official; there may be a conflict between the official name (the one on a published map or the GNIS list) and the one locally known and used. And let's not forget local nicknames. They weren't always given uncomplimentarily by outsiders.

A Classification of Names

[Careful here: these categories are of the names themselves and not the reasons they were given to the places or features they identify. Unless the namer left a record of why he chose a particular name and not some other, and most of them didn't, we may never know this.]

1. Personal Names

    a. Full names, family names, given names, nicknames of founders, first settlers, discoverers, first postmasters or post office petitioners, namers. (In the absence of knowledge of a specific person's identity it's safer to attribute the name to a family.)

    b. The names of other local persons or families: landowners, public officials, merchants, other businessmen & professionals

    c. Friends or relatives of early or other settlers, postmasters, merchants, etc.

    d. Non local persons associated in some way with the place: absentee landowners, mining and railroad company officials, or with its namer: e.g., the namer's non local forebears.

    e. Prominent non local persons, families, groups including national leaders, military heroes, famous historic figures, contemporary newsmakers not having any association with the place or its namer.

2. Names Taken From Other Places or Features

    a. Names imported from earlier residences of first settlers to reduce the strangeness of a new environment

    b. Names transferred from nearby features: waterways, schools, churches, mills, mines, stations, landings, etc. (Name clusters: several names in a vicinity that are derived from a single feature, e.g., Jonesville, Jones School, Jonesville Mine, Jones Landing, from Jones Creek)

    c. Names taken from other places in America or abroad with no association with the place or its residents. Such

names may have been inspired by accounts in history books or the contemporary media.

3. Local or Descriptive Names

    a. Location, direction, position, or distance with reference to other places or features: East Jonesville, Jonesville Junction, Central City, Midway, Second Creek, Four Mile Creek, Edgewater, Hilltop, Head of Paint (referring to Paint Creek)

    b. Shape, size, odor, color: Little Jones Creek, Flat Creek, Red River, Long Fork, Stinking Creek, Blue Hole (a pond with no perceivable bottom).

    c. Names derived directly or indirectly from some other feature or characteristic of the natural environment

        1. Landscape, terrain, topography: Edgewater, Valley View, Dry Creek, No Creek (an intermittent stream or one barely visible during dry spells)

        2. Soil and minerals: Oil Springs, Fertility, Coalmont, Lead Hill

        3. Water bodies

        4. Animals: Beaver Creek, Beaver Dam, Elk Creek

        5. Plant life: Maple Grove, Grassy Creek, Poplarville, Oakton

[Be careful with names referring to animals or plant life. It would be easy to assume that these reflect the local prominence of these features at the time of the naming but they may actually reflect wishful thinking or homeplace reminiscence. These names shouldn't be taken at face value. The historic or present prevalence of these referents may be merely coincidental. (e.g., Elkhorn may refer to an artifact decorating a local store. And Lions Den may not refer to any native mountain lions but to a book on African travel in the possession of the namer's young daughter.)

    d. Names of Approbation and Disapprobation (Ramsay) or otherwise suggestively descriptive or metaphoric

(often based on one's first personal impression): Pleasant Valley, Fairview, Lonesome Creek, Rough River, Hell's Half Acre, Needmore, Hell For Certain Creek, the so-called "po' mouthing names like Hardscrabble, Lickskillet. In short, names that reflect satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the new place.

4. Historic Events

    a. Non local (American or International commemorative)

    b. Local (occurring at or near the site at a single point in time)

    c. Local (recurring at or near the site as a fairly typical pattern of behavior characteristic of local people). These include names reflecting economic activities like mining, lumbering, horse raising and breeding (including the names of favorite horses)

    d. Exclamations (or the first words uttered at the site or at the time of its settlement or naming. Careful here: some of these may be apochryphal or allegorical.

5. Subjective Names that reveal more about the namers than about the places or features named.

    a. Inspirational and symbolic names including those reflecting the aspirations and ideals of early settlers: Liberty, Hope, Harmony, Alliance, Fairplay, Freedom, Independence, Concord, Union. These are usually not descriptive and could be incongruous or even misleading. Also-commendatory, sentimental, or promotional names usually designed to justify or attract settlement: Green Acres, Rolling Meadows, Lakeview, Garden Springs, Park Hills, River Park, Acre Estates.

    b. Nicknames of the kinds of people who settled or lived there referring to their character or behavior (descriptive, adulatory, or derogatory; the last is often attributed to outsiders): Rogues Harbor, Sodom (sometimes Gomorrah is nearby), Pinhook.

c. Literary, Scriptural (or religious) and other names reflecting "high culture," tastes, interests, or aspirations. One must be careful in assuming that a literary name was inspired directly by that work, rather than a personal name or an imported name that elsewhere may have had a literary source. The Bible was a common name source in that it was often the most common reading material of early settlers. And it may also have accounted for a number of personal names that were the name sources of places these persons had settled.

d. Humorous names and miscellaneous oddities reminiscent of events or conditions at the time of settlement or discovery or naming. (These would usually be anecdotes about the name, place, name giving). And coined names: ingenious creations out of parts of words or other names, including combined names or blendings: Shepola, Kenvir, Edgoten, Texarkana; name reversals: Lennut, Trevlac; natural or deliberate corruptions to produce a unique name.

6. Mistake names (e.g., misinterpretations by the Post Office Department like Mazie (for Maxie), Eriline (for Evaline). Curiously, few of these errors were ever corrected.

7. Names derived from several possible sources. It's obvious in examining this classification that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Many names may have had more than one source and could thus be placed in more than one category (e.g., the name of a national hero may have been borrowed from its use as a placename in another state.)

8. Underived names including those for which there is not even a guess much less a folk etymology. No matter how hard you look for the derivations of some names you may never find them.

One of the things that should trouble us in our attempts to arrive at placename derivations is a lack of agreement among our several sources of information. Which explanation for a name do we accept when efforts to

authenticate each are equally successful or equally inconclusive?

Take for instance, the Wabash County, Indiana community of La Fountaine (pronounced fountain) which used to be known as Ashland. Some say it derived its first name from the fact that it was the site of an old tannery which burned a large amount of wood and always left a great residue of ashes. Other Wabash Countians, however, think the name came from Henry Clay's home in Lexington, Ky. for the town's founder, Daniel Grant, had been a great admirer of Clay's. (In either case, the name was changed to its present appellation in 1873, when the railroad came through, to avoid confusion with another Ashland near New Castle.)

While many persons still believe that the community of Mansfield in Parke County, Indiana was named for the city in Ohio, at least one person Mrs. Xenia Garrigus of nearby Raccoon Township, preferred to accept the more literal meaning of the name. A hill overlooking this community, which was originally known as *Dickson's Mill*, was the site of a drill field for soldiers during the Civil War. Since it was off bounds to women, it came to be known as the "man's field," and when a post office was to be established there, the name *Mansfield* was submitted. Mrs. Garrigus claimed she didn't know of a single local resident who is descended from anyone who had ever lived in Mansfield, Ohio.

Data Sources

The sources of all data—whether from published works, maps, unpublished works (journals, diaries, land records, correspondence, manuscripts, etc.) or personal interviews should be cited. For a published source one should mention the author and title, the place and date of publication (if given), the publisher or printer or compiler (if appropriate), and the specific pages (if given). Each map should be referenced by its cartographer (if known), the company or agency which authorized and/or published it, and the date of

its publication or issuance, along with (if known) the date(s) of the survey on which the map was derived. An interview should be credited by the name of the informant (unless he asked to be anonymous), his address, occupation, association with the place or feature, and the date and place of the interview.

Sources of Names and Information About Names

1. First there are the historical maps for places no longer in existence or which contain names that were subsequently changed. These include the 30 and 15 minute topographic maps (done for a few states), the late nineteenth century atlases prepared and published by Beers, Baskin-Forster, Lake, and other companies for selected states and counties. These may be found in state historical society libraries, state archives, university research library map rooms, and some state highway department map libraries. Some of these libraries may also have copies (reproductions) of the maps prepared by early explorers and land developers, U.S. and state land plats issued by the Bureau of Land Management, and waterway surveys and navigational maps issued by other bureaus of the federal government including maps of stage lines, riverboat routings and schedules, railroad time tables. Most research libraries (especially academic ones) are depositories of federal documents and railroad/steamboat/airline/roadway records otherwise long unavailable. Some county and state archives (and possibly the Library of Congress) will have old county plat books which are usually the most detailed of all maps, far more inclusive than the government topographic sheets. Some of these have been published and may be available in the "special collections" of state or academic libraries. If not, they may still be in courthouses. Some of the field notes of surveyors and Geological Survey teams may also be found in some courthouses or in state Geological Survey offices or in a state archive or the National Archives in Washington. The 7½

minute top. maps, also readily available now for every part of the country, and which form the basis of most of every state's GNIS lists, are far from complete; they show only contemporary places and features and only (if Kentucky is a guide), for roughly one fourth of the known identified referents.

2. Post Office Department (now U.S. Postal Service) records are also on file in the National Archives. These include the microfilmed Records of Appointments of Postmasters and the Site Location Reports for each state. The first lists alphabetically, for each county, its post offices from 1832 to 1971 and each postmaster from the date he was authorized to serve until he was succeeded by another, and the date an office closed (if it did) and was re-established (if that were the case). A separate list for the period before 1832 is also available on film but alphabetically for the entire country rather than by individual states, and the offices were not identified by counties till the mid 1920s. Records after 1870 list the office to which a closed office's papers were sent.

Less useful, perhaps, are the Site Location Reports. These locate offices by distance and direction from major streams, railroad tracks and stations, and other post offices (usually the nearest). But locations were not pinpointed as, for instance, at the mouth of such-and-such a stream, much less by geographic coordinates which postmasters who provided the locations wouldn't have known about. And offices were usually located by road miles from something else and few nineteenth century roads exist today or are even known to today's area residents. In short, these records are not very accurate or precise; and they were not available for offices in operation before the late 1860s, short-lived offices, or those that were authorized but never actually operated. For some offices these reports will give the names first proposed for them but that, for some reason, were not acceptable to the Post Office Department; these were usually names already in use in the state or so common that they could be confused with

already existing ones in that state or elsewhere. They also showed post office site changes for, until well into the twentieth century, post offices were in the homes or places of business of their postmasters.

3. Land and land claim case records and copies of early land suit depositions may still be available in many courthouses, though in most states they have been or are being microfilmed by the state archives or historical societies. Also available in most such libraries and in Latter Day Saints . branch libraries in most parts of the country are that church's films of deeds, licenses, family records, etc.

4. The annual reports on mines and minerals issued by state Geological Surveys for many years are a good source of old mining and mine camp names. Many of these places were located and identified by owners or operators.

5. Published county histories are usually available in county and state libraries but are of variable reliability. They too often contained data accepted as hearsay without having been checked out. The same is true of many of the recent centennial and sesquicentennial histories and special anniversary issues of local newspapers. Many of these publications were more interested in contemporary families and included little about the earliest families (those most likely to have been name sources). Some local and state newspapers have occasionally published articles or series on area placenames. They should certainly be checked out but the data therein should be accepted only cautiously.

6. Don't forget church and school record books. The names of a place's first settlers may be given in the local church's first parish books. These books may also give the derivation of the church's name from which the community's name may have been taken. Church centennial publications may also include useful historical information. School records may be found in town, county, or district school superintendents' offices.

7. Available in each state's principal archives are the accessioned materials compiled for that state's WPA files. Much valuable historical and genealogical data may be found here but they too should be accepted cautiously.

8. Family histories (published or otherwise), available in state, historical society, and Latter Day Saints libraries as well as those in the possession of professional and amateur genealogists throughout the state may contain valuable data on early settlers, founders, and namers.

9. In addition to their maps, old railroad schedules and timetables are available in the historical archives of a number of interstate railroad companies. These will list stations no longer in existence as well as those that had name changes.

10. Sometimes the only sources of information on small or undistinguished rural communities are local residents, perhaps the descendants of the founders or early settlers. They may be willing to share some of the unpublished writings of their forebears: diaries, letters, memoirs, old business correspondence and papers, day books of county officials, ledgers, which may have been found in obscure places like attics or otherwise saved by their descendants. Some may even have been placed, as manuscripts, in county or state libraries and archives. Keep in mind, though, that the testimony of local residents will vary widely in reliability and thoroughness. One should be selective here. Some persons don't like to admit they don't know the answer to a question. They may, unwittingly or otherwise, pass on a story or folk etymology that someone unfamiliar with the area would likely take seriously.

Older retired persons don't have a monopoly on interest and knowledge of historical matters. Some younger persons, like teachers, newspaper reporters and feature writers, county engineers, extension agents, etc., may be history buffs and, from the discipline of their professions, may be quite reliable sources of information. Generally the best sources are local postmasters, if natives of the vicinity or at

least longtime residents, and they would certainly know who among their customers would be most knowledgeable about local history. Also county assessors, game and fire wardens, county health workers, local lawmen who are at least more likely to be accurate in their testimony while their job requires them to be acquainted with the names and situations of the geographic features of their area.

How about local historical societies? One might want to be more careful here. Not that their members might not be good data sources and their libraries and archives might have much valuable unpublished material, but they might be a bit wary of an outsider taking an interest in subjects they themselves may be pursuing (though, in some cases, their pursuits may have been occasioned by the interest shown by the outsider. Byrd Granger learned this, and I did too, the hard way, in several counties I visited.)

In any event, there's no substitute for visits to the areas of interest themselves for no other reason than to avoid making unwarranted assumptions about the possible derivation of a name based on the name itself. Many derivations are not what they seem. For instance, it may be easy to assume that Wolf Creek was named for the wolves that used to abound there so one doesn't bother to learn that the first settler there was George Wolf. Or one might imagine that Lovely, in Martin County, Ky. was named for scenery, but it too was named for a local person, the first storekeeper. And that Mt. Pleasant is what it sounds like but when you get there you find it in a valley but learn that its first settlers had come from another place of that name. And, of course, it goes without saying, that the only source of pronunciations are local persons themselves. This may explain why few placename dictionaries include pronunciations; they weren't based on extensive field visits.

The best advice any placenames surveyor could have is never to take anything for granted unless it's known for a fact. (That's good mountain talk.) It's desirable to double check

every item of data one secures, from as many different sources as possible.

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