

Street Nomenclature in Mexico City

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FROM ITS EARLIEST DAYS the City of Mexico, or old Tenochtitlán, has escaped one of the plagues of the medieval cities of Europe: their winding streets and irregular arrangements. It has to some extent escaped the narrowness of the worst European streets; but a maze of names has grown up about the streets, and time has not helped greatly in reducing it. Perhaps the oldest city in the New World continually occupied, its streets have had time to develop legends and histories, whose origin can be lost in the mist of centuries; and each of the old streets has a lengthy, an adventurous, a romantic, sometimes bloody history of its own.

Although built by the Aztecs on an island during the two centuries before the Spanish conquest, the city from the beginning enjoyed a certain amount of regularity in the street system. We have the names of very few of the streets as of 1519, specifically, the arterial causeways that led from the mainland and converged upon the great square at the temple of Huitzilopochtli. These causeways took their name from the mainland town or suburb to which they led from the central square. The north causeway, about one league or three miles long, led to Tepeyac, now the town of Guadalupe, and bore that name. The causeway leading west was named after the town of Tlacopam, to which it led, a little less than a league in length. In the south lay the Calzada de Huitzilopochco, later Tacuba, about two leagues long; and to join it at a point about a half league from the capital came the Calzada de Iztapalapan, the most famous of them all, the route of the first entry by the Spanish.

These streets and their continuations as causeways were wide and straight, and the Spaniards who viewed them from the southern route and later from the heights of the Pyramid and Temple of Huitzilopochtli were astounded at the width and straightness

and regular construction. Even after the destruction of the city by Cortés and its rebuilding, these same streets continued to create that effect. In 1554 Cervantes Salazar himself pointed out the regularity and beauty of these streets.¹

Besides these four names we have few, if, indeed, any, street names left to us. The rest of the city besides these principal avenues had a maze of streets or canals, some solid ground, some purely canals between rows of houses, which led some Spaniards to compare the city with Venice; others, apparently a great many others, had both a dry footway and a waterway.² The size of these streets and canals has been a source of much argument. Some historians have described them as extremely narrow, others as very wide, allowing the passage of quite large boats. Apparently, too, the city had to some extent a construction by which the front entrance of larger houses opened upon solid ground or solid streets, while the rear entrance opened upon a canal.

When we consider how much of the old city has been preserved or reconstructed, it comes as a surprise that we do not know the names of the smaller streets. For example, we know the names of scores of temples and *barrios* or districts,³ twenty-four squares and plazas,⁴ several palaces, and even some of the larger houses. So presumably the smaller streets had names, but few if any have survived. Luis González Obregón⁵ has listed sixteen streets and indicated several others not named, which still bear Nahuatl names, with the presumption that they continue Pre-Conquest names. We can by no means conclude this because without some intervening documentation we have no way of knowing whether the name has or has not been assigned in later periods, such as

¹ Cervantes Salazar, Francisco, *Life in the City of Mexico*, 1554. University of Texas Press, 1955, pp. 49–50.

² Valle-Arizpe, Artemio de, *Historia de la Ciudad de México según relatos de sus cronistas*. Mexico: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1939, p. 68. See also Motolinía, Toribio de, *History of the Indians of New Spain*. (Translated by F. B. Steck), Washington, 1951, p. 271.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴ Viera, Juan de, *Compendiosa narración de la Ciudad de México*, Mexico: Editorial Guaranía, 1952, p. 103.

⁵ González Obregón, Luis, *Las Calles de México*, 2a Ed. con prólogo y elogios de don Carlos González Peña. . . Mexico: Imp. M. León Sánchez, 1924. 2 vols. (Another edition is dated 1936; the 7th Edition 1947) I, 2.

the Colonial Period. Moreover, the names appear mostly in the older or "Indian" part of the city, for which we have little historical or descriptive documentation.

A critical period for the street names is that between 1521 and 1524, when written records, such as records of the Cabildo, began. Immediately after the end of the siege of Tenochtitlán and once the Spaniards were masters of the city, a period of reconstruction began. Temples and houses and walls had been demolished as part of the fighting; where passage was impeded, the canals were filled in, and the city lay in ruins. Cortés then ordered the new Aztec Emperor Cuauhtémoc to see to the cleaning up of the rubble, and he ordered his geometrician, Alonso García Bravo, to map the city and prepare for a new division of the property.⁶ Although this was long before the Royal Cedula of 1542, which set forth the royal plans for the spatial organization of new cities, the result of this survey followed its outlines remarkably well. Taking the site of the Temple of Huitzilopochtli as a center, he had streets laid out at right angles and with long, straight vistas. In this, of course, he blended with the pre-existing Aztec plan, and where he varied the arrangement, it was usually to take in the old system. It is reasonably safe, then, to conclude that in the heart of Mexico City today we walk on the heels of the pedestrians of ancient Tenochtitlán.

At that time Cortés was criticized for choosing the base of the temple of Huitzilopochtli for the site of the new cathedral, building a Christian church on the site of the center of a vicious religion. He was likewise criticized for locating his capital on the island, with its danger from floods and the problems of transportation. But apparently Cortés defended himself sufficiently, and the ease with which the religion of the people was changed to Christianity and the Aztec regime to the Spanish was no doubt aided materially by that choice. Neither he nor his apologists can defend the choice from the other complaint.⁷

During the first years of reconstruction and of the colonial

⁶ Valle-Arizpe, *op. cit.*, p. 136. Also Valle-Arizpe, *Calle Vieja y Calle Nueva*, Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1949, pp. 12-13. For the arrangement of the city in 1521, see Dan Stanislawski, "Early Spanish Town Planning in the New World." *Geographical Review*, XXXVII (1947) 97-101.

⁷ Stanislawski. *op. cit.* p. 99.

period the roads were often called by the names of the town to which they led or the site along which they passed, as the Camino de los Volcanes, leading up from Cholula, Tlahuac, the dike-causeway-road that passed along between Xochimilco and Chalco. Later when other dikes were built and used as roads, they took the name of the dike or lake in which they were located.⁸

On the outskirts of the city and on the periphery of the island a series of chinampas or floating gardens held a considerable part of the inhabitants; and since these could change their position, creating new arrangements, we need not look for street names beyond the heart of the city itself.

The Spaniards chose their own areas and had homes built that resembled feudal castles⁹ for protection, not for beauty.¹⁰

From the earliest times, however, when writers refer to streets by name, they nearly always use Spanish terms. We are usually at a loss to know whether they are names imposed by the Spaniards without regard for local names, or whether they are translations. Specifically, for the first years of the Conquest we have references to these: Calle de la Celada, Calle de la Carrera, Calle de los Oidores, Calle de la Guardia, Calle de las Atarazanas, Calle de la Agua (alias Acequia Real), Portal de las Flores (still extant), while probably of much older age are the Indian names of Necatitlán, Chiconautla (= nueve caminos de agua), also Nautotlán, Nahuatlato, Tlascoaque, and Tezontlale (= lugar del tezontle).¹¹

Some of our earliest information comes from the *Actas de Cabildo de la Ciudad de México*. As early as 1524 Spaniards began to ask for landgrants or *solares* in the city. In the minutes of the meetings we find addresses given for the Calle de la Guardia,¹² Calle de los Donceles,¹³ Calle de Istapalapa, Calle de Atacuba

⁸ Francisco de Garay, *El Valle de México. Apuntes históricos sobre su hidrografía desde los tiempos más remotos hasta nuestros días*. Mexico: Tip. Sec. de Fomento, 1888, p. 21.

⁹ Valle-Arizpe, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁰ Cervantes Salazar, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹¹ "Calles Antiguas de México," in Juan N. del Valle, *El Viajero en México. Completa guía de forasteros para 1864*. Mexico: Imprenta de Andrade y Escalante 1864, pp. 701-703. Also Ángel R. de Arellano, *Leyendas y tradiciones relativas a las calles de México*. Mexico: J. J. Terrazos, 1894, 80 pages.

¹² *Actas de Cabildo de la Ciudad de México*. Mexico: 1889. Edited by Ignacio Bejarano. c. 100 vols., I, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, 1.

(error for Tacuba[?]), Calle de la Celada, Calle del Hospital (a square, not a street in 1524), Calle del Agua, Calzada de Atucuba (Tacuba[?]), and Zalapa,¹⁴ Calle de las Canoas,¹⁵ and Calle de la Carrera.¹⁶

One indication in the *Actas de Cabildo* that street names may not have established themselves everywhere appears in some circumlocutions instead of names used in locating places and plots of land within the city: "Los dichos señores dieron a Pedro Gabiosa un solar que está a las espaldas del solar de Larios y delante de la Calle que es frontero al solar de Francisco de Solís. . ."¹⁷

On other occasions the term *Calle real* is used. The Cabildo

¹⁴ "... un solar que está en una calle travieza de la Zalapa" (abbreviation for Iztapalapa?) in *Ibid.*, I, 17.

¹⁵ "... un solar que está en las calles de las canoas que sale a la Plaza . . ." in *Ibid.*, I, 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Other expressions used as designations of streets:

"... el canton de la Calle que sale á la Calle de Juan Ceciliano . . ." (I, 9)

"... la calle real frontero del solar de Cristóbal de Quesada . . ." (I, 9)

"... pidió un solar que está en la calle que vá de la Plaza de esta ciudad hazia el tianguis de la casa de Juan Velazquez que es que alinda con solar de Alonso de Ávila y la calle real en medio." (I, 11. Almost the same statement on page 13.)

"... (le dieron) por solar uno que esta en una calle que atrabieza a la de Yztapalapa que ha por linderos de la una parte el solar de Riobo e de la otra parte la calle real . . ." (I, 23).

"... los señores le hicieron merced de le dar toda la tierra . . . en el camino que va a Chapultepeque a las espaldas de Juan Garrido e de las otras huertas que estan dadas hasta la alaguna . . ." (I, 28)

"... le señalaron por solar un solar que está en la trabieza de la calle de la Guardia que es a las espaldas de Alonso Nortez junto a la calle del agua que viene a la plaza syn perjuycio de tercero." (I, 28)

"... le señalaron por solar la tierra que esta en la agua que ha por linderos de la una parte la calle que atrabieza delante de Antón Bravo asia la casa de Manuel Berdugo . . ." (I, 29)

"... le señalaron por solar uno que esta en la calle de Celada que va de las carnicerías frontero de Villaruel e de Alonso Perez la calle en medio el qual le señalaron . . ." (I, 31)

"... pidió le hicieran merced de un solar que esta e alinda con la calle real que ba a Tacuba e por el lado con la calle que ba por la puerta de Juan Belasquez indio e por detras e espaldas linde del solar de Ruy Gonzalez." (I, 37)

"... le señala . . . toda la tierra que esta de una parte e de otra de la calzada que va a Chapultepeque . . . desde la fuente de San Lázaro a esta parte hazia la ciudad y por aqui derecho de la calle que tiene San Lázaro hasta el Tatelolco e a la mano yzquierda todo lo que esta por edificar hasta Chapultepeque." I, 205 (April 3, 1529).

evidently used it generically, not to refer to a specific street but to its nature. The Spaniards, accustomed to the winding streets of Spanish cities, thought of a straight street with long vistas as a special type, and they described it as *real*, evidently, because they knew no specific name for it.¹⁸

An examination of the *Actas del Cabildo* shows the lines of Spanish settlement in the early years. In 1524 half of the land grants or solares were located on the Calzada de Tacuba, beginning in the vicinity of the Pyramid of Huitzilopochtli or later the Cathedral, and near the castle of Cortés and running west along that street and a nearby street that led to Chapultepec. Another line of settlement led from the same center southward, along the Spanish side of the Great Canal, the Calle del Agua, or Calle de la Acequia. Outside the core about the Cathedral and Castle of Cortés, however, the cross-streets apparently had no particular names, at least not officially accepted, and the Cabildo referred to land plots by naming the owners of adjoining plots. This paucity of names at a time when land was being distributed indicates that Indian names had been discarded or forgotten. The fact that the Cabildo did use Indian terms for the arterial ways leading to the mainland indicates that they did not object to Indian terms, rather that they did not know them. The segregation of Indians in the eastern part of the city, beyond the Calle de la Acequia and the rapid Hispanization of the core of the city shows that the city officials were probably unaware and uninterested in learning the original names. Hence the circumlocutions used in the early years to show the location of the land grants. When names were later applied, they showed almost completely Spanish concepts.

The first *Actas del Cabildo* also show early use of the names of land-owners, squares, corners, and prominent buildings as points of reference in giving addresses. This system continued in the form of the use of this type of name to refer to short stretches of a given street, regardless of its length in our terms.

In the process of reconstruction, although some of the canals were filled in, a great deal of commerce continued on the waters

¹⁸ José María Marroquí, *La Ciudad de México. Contiene: el origen de los nombres de muchos de sus calles y plazas, del de varios establecimientos públicos y privados, y no pocas noticias curiosas y entretenidas.* Mexico: Tip. "La Europa," 1900. 3 vols. I, 6.

of the others. The Indians had so few animals and the need for transport was so imperative that probably the capital could not have survived without extensive use of the waterways.¹⁹ As a result of the remodeling of the city, seven principal canals, evidently the same that had been important in pre-Conquest days, remained for use. These seven main canals bore both Spanish and Nahuatl names.²⁰ The value of these canals to the city appears in the fact that far from filling them all in, the city administration actually lengthened them by 6,000 yards between 1637 and 1748, from 16,616 varas to 22,363 varas.²¹

The largest of the canals early lost its Nahuatl name and appears first as the Acequia Real, which crossed several of the main streets of the new city. This canal, entering from the southwest,²² was bordered by land routes or streets which passed the building of San Juan de Letrán, the Coliseo, and under a great variety of bridges, then continued northeast past the Calle de Tacuba, the palaces of Cortés and the Archbishop, and the fortress or Atarazana.²³ At least three other canals joined it along the route.

Moreover, this same Calle de la Acequia or Calle de las Canoas served another purpose — that of separating the social classes in the capital. Within the limits of the canal the Spaniards built their homes and conducted their business. Beyond it lived the Indians in their less pretentious abodes. Spaniards were not allowed to own land east of the canal, nor the Indians west of it.²⁴ The canal kept its independent status until the middle of the 18th Century, finally to be filled in and to become a street, keeping the name of Calle de las Canoas, or Calle de la Acequia, then consecutively the names of Tlapaleros, Refugio, Coliseo Viejo, and Callejón de los Dolores, and later becoming the Avenida del 16 de Septiembre and Avenida Hidalgo Oriente 2.

These canals, of course, did not furnish potable water for the city; rather they served for transportation and sewage. Fresh water cam from several wells and even a "subterranean channel"

¹⁹ Cervantes Salazar, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

²⁰ Valle-Arizpe, *Calle Vieja y Calle Nueva*, p. 25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²³ Cervantes Salazar, *op. cit.*, pp. 49 and 56.

²⁴ Valle-Arizpe, *Calle Vieja y Calle Nueva*, p. 45.

from a fresh-water supply in Chapultepec.²⁵ Gradually these canals became cesspools that raised the water to street level and aided in flooding the city. The Marqués de Montesclaros ordered them cleaned out in 1605,²⁶ but the result of his efforts soon disappeared. With the gradual lowering of the water level of Lake Texcoco, however, and development of land traffic, the canals found less and less use. The Spanish erected several buildings over the canals,²⁷ and gradually filled them in. Where they remained as streets, however, the next century profited by having wider passageways, fortunately for modern traffic.

The Valley of Mexico has no natural drainage, and floods plagued the city throughout the Colonial era. The valley has five lakes, the lowest of which was Texcoco, with the island-city of Tenochtitlán. Heavy rainfall and melting of snow meant a higher lake-level, and therefore floods. On one occasion, 1629, water stood in the streets of the city for two years. Various schemes were tried for relieving the danger; and at last, after tremendous efforts, a canal was cut through to the Tula River, which led to the sea. After that achievement the danger of floods diminished, and the level of Lake Texcoco gradually lowered from evaporation and a series of dams on the tributary streams.

The desiccation of Lake Texcoco gradually turned the capital from an island into a port, then an inland city. This change came about so gradually that it was not heralded by the writers of the times, and only by a comparison of the maps can the progress be evaluated. The level was relatively low and the bottom flat, even in 1519; and as the water line shrank, it left first swamps, then mainland. Maps of Mexico for 1608 still show the city an island joined to the mainland by causeways.²⁸ Maps of 1700 show cause-

²⁵ Cervantes Salazar, *op. cit.*, p. 52. This construction was really an aqueduct, partly covered, partly exposed. (*Ibid.*, p. 70). Keeping the water supply sanitary posed a continuous problem. At first a certain Juan Garrido had a contract to guard the water in passage; but when his work proved unsatisfactory, the Cabildo turned that charge over to some Indians, December 29, 1524 (*Actas de Cabildo de la Ciudad de México*, I, 23).

²⁶ Marroquí, *op. cit.*, I, 181. In pre-Conquest times the Aztecs did not make use of the canals for disposing of sewage. Rather, they furnished barges which gathered the sewage and transported it to the mainland for use as fertilizer.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 183.

²⁸ Ola Apenas, *Mapas antiguos del Valle de México*, Mexico, 1947, Lámina No. 16.

ways but also a strip of dry land on the west side.²⁹ Again in 1715 a more detailed map³⁰ shows solid ground between Chapultepec and the city. Houses with orderly streets occupied nearly all of the island itself. By 1774 the water in the lake within the dikes had disappeared, and only four canals emptied into Texcoco proper. Since then the capital may be considered an inland city.

The Colonial Period. Surviving maps show an orderly arrangement of the city with squares and straight streets, but unfortunately no names. Studies made of the older maps have applied names, but they are usually modern or late colonial, not contemporaneous, names. Religious and public buildings of the early colonial period can be located, but the names of the streets are estimates.

The map of the capital by Alonzo de Santa Cruz in the middle of the 17th century again shows us no names, although the street system is clear. We know of course, that by that time the colonial system was well in progress, and that the streets had names because Cervantes Salazar named some of them for us, a hundred years before. He mentioned the famous Tacuba Street, which led to the central plaza. He described but did not name the artisans' street, where the guilds plied their trades; he mentioned San Francisco Street, next to Tacuba for size.³¹ Juan de Viera also mentioned it. Another is mentioned, and he described but did not name: "... one which leads to the market place and takes its name from the convent ..."³² For that period we also know the names of Calle del Reloj, and Calle del Arzobispado.³³ From 1625 we also know the names Calle de San Agustín, La Platería, (Calle de los Plateros?) and Calle del Águila, and La Alameda.³⁴

The Plano de Juan Gómez de Trasmonte of 1628 again gives details, and the map bears a legend listing a number of buildings, but no street names.³⁵

However, by the time the colonial system was in full swing

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Lámina No. 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Lámina No. 20.

³¹ Cervantes Salazar, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Juan de Viera, *Planos de la Ciudad de México, siglos XVI y XVII.*

³⁴ Orozco y Berra, Manuel, in *La Gran Ciudad de México Tenochtitlán, Perla de la Nueva España, según relatos de antaño y Ogaño.* Cultura, VIII (1818) 104.

³⁵ Manuel Toussaint, *Planos de la Ciudad de México: Siglos XVI y XVII ...* Mexico: "Cultura," 1938.

a number of street names were known to us. From those we can see that at least in the Spanish section names came from a limited number of sources:

1. Streets whose names came from their association with certain significant buildings which faced them. This explains the frequent change in names; a part of a street may be named for a convent, but as soon as one is several blocks from that convent, the designation no longer has any cogency, and it is only natural to refer then to another building. As a result, on many streets names changed every few blocks, although the street might be straight.

2. Guilds soon after their establishment in Mexico gave their old world system to the capital, and we find streets throughout the Colonial Era named for the trade pursued on them, *e. g.* Calle de los Plateros,³⁶ Curtidores, Celaceros, Chiquihuiteros, Talabarteros, and Cordobones.

3. Saints and holy references. These, however, are not simple applications of the names of saints to a street; in most cases they are the short form for a designation of a building with a longer name, such as San Francisco, for the Convento de San Francisco, and Santa María for la Iglesia de Santa María la Redonda.

4. Whimsical and descriptive names: El Indio Triste, Calle de Tumbaburros, Volador, Calle de las Ratas, El Niño Perdido, Puerta Falsa de San Andrés. This includes animals, *e. g.* Hormigas, Papitas, Titiriteros, Torito, and Zopilote, Azpo, Vaquita, and Puente de los Gallos. Some names are even more fantastic: Sal, si puedes.

5. Empirical names, mostly based on the route or destination: Tacuba, Istapalapa, etc.

6. Names of persons: These appear, but rarely. The period of such names followed the War of Independence. When they appear, they usually designate a residence rather than a person.

7. Indian names, either new or ancient, and for reasons not clear until the etymology and history is studied in each case.

The street names of the center of the city can be fairly well reconstructed as of the year 1635, thanks to a poem discovered in the Bibliothèque Nationale, which describes in verse a tour of the center of the city, naming the side streets with some humor and comments.³⁷ Many other names used in the Colonial Period

³⁶ González Obregón, *Las Calles de México*, I, 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 214-222.

have been published with the modern equivalents and some historical notes.³⁸

For the beginning of the 19th century we have a fairly complete listing of the names of the streets.³⁹ We know there were 304 streets, but most of the names preserved are Spanish, (Andalicio, Cristal, Ceballos, Copado, Destierro, Caray, Crados, etc.) rarely Indian (e. g. Apahuázcan, Chichimecápan, Coconeapan, Cuátlan). Very few bore the names of real persons (Garay, Ceballos, Doña Andrea, Juanico, etc.⁴⁰), and they usually referred to that part of a street where the person once had a residence.

Republican Period, or the 19th Century. With the end of the Colonial Period, 1821–1824, a new epoch began in the use of names for streets. While the city expanded gradually and developed more streets, they tended to use fewer direct religious references and not to confine the names to a single block but to extend them the whole length of a straight street, somewhat on the order of the North American cities. During this period personal names came into popularity. In the 19th century nearly all of the heroes of the War for Independence had a street named for them, mostly by the expedient of substituting the name for an older one. This practice is easily explained by the positivistic philosophy of many of the leaders and the anti-clerical bias of the ruling groups through most of the century. It was not the fashion to use names with religious connotations. A concordance of the old and new system of names, issued in 1908, gives the new names for old streets, and the late names of streets too new to have old names. Of the new streets there are 87, but not one of them bears a name with religious connotation. When several short streets were put together to form a new one, the name generalized was the more famous, and in some cases it might well be a holy name.

³⁸ "Nombres antiguos de las calles de México," in *Ibid.*, I, 213–225. See also Federico Gómez de Orozco, *La Plaza de Guardiola. Monografía histórica . . .* Mexico: Banco de México, 1942; Hare, W. L., "The City of Mexico," in *Garden Cities and Town Planning*, XIII (1923) 135–142; Miguel S. Macedo, *Mi barrio (segunda mitad del siglo XIX)*, Mexico: Ed. Cultura, 1930; Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, *Calle vieja y calle nueva*, Mexico, Editorial Jus, 1949.

³⁹ *México dividido en cuarteles mayores y menores. Nombres de sus calles. Las de sus Jueces y Alcaldes, etc.*, Manuel Antonio Valdés, 1811, quoted in Luis González Obregón, *México en 1810*, Mexico, Editorial Stylo, 1943.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

Of the 87 new names the distribution was as follows:

Names based on the environment:

Avenida del Hipodromo, Avenida del Hospital

Names of respected persons:

Augustín Melgar, Joaquín García Icazbalceta, Juan de la Barrera, Juan Escotia, Pasteur, Riva Palacio, and Vicente Suárez

Names of places:

States in Mexico: Colima, Chihuahua, Durango, Guanajuato, Puebla, Queretaro, San Luis Potosí, Sinaloa, Zacatecas

Cities in Mexico: Acapulco, Atlixco, Avenida Mazatlán, Avenida Monclova, Córdoba, Cozumel, Cuernavaca, Fresno, Frontera, Guadalajara, Guaymas, Jalapa, Mérida, Orizaba, Pachuca, Plaza de Orizaba, Tabasco, Tampico, Zamora

Rivers: Amazonas, Balsas, Danubio, Lerma, Mississippi, Neva, Nilo, Pánuco, Plaza del Río Blanco del Rhin, Río de la Plata, del Tamesis, Tibes

Cities abroad: Florencia, Medellín, Orleans, Salamanca, Toledo, Valladolid, Varsovia

Islands: Cozumel⁴¹

The new names, of course, were not given at random; even the place names, as an examination of a map shows, followed certain patterns in the part of the city where they appear. For example, in the southwest corner of the city, in the 8th district, beginning

⁴¹ *Diccionario de las calles de la Ciudad de México con equivalencia de la nueva nomenclatura comparada con la antigua y vice versa*, México, 1908. Cf. also *Diccionario de las calles de la Ciudad de México. Instrucciones para usar el plano. México en 1810, 1876, 1909*, Mexico: Imp. Lacoud, n. d.; Felipe N. García, *Plano topográfico de la Ciudad de México, con una fácil combinación para buscar y encontrar en el acto la calle que se dice por la nueva o antigua nomenclatura, Mexico*, n. d.; Ayuntamiento de México, *Dictamen y votos particulares de los miembros de las comisiones unidas de hacienda y aguas del Ayuntamiento de la capital sobre la solicitud del ingeniero D. Carlos A. de Medina en que hace proposiciones*, México, 1887; *México dividido en ocho cuarteles mayores y treinta y tres menores mandó formar por el Ayuntamiento Constitucional de México . . .* México: Imp. Hijos de Murguía, 1871; *Nomenclatura por orden alfabético de las calles de la Ciudad de México e instrucciones para el uso del plano . . .*, México, American Book and Printing Co., n. d.; *Plano general de indicación de la Ciudad de México con la división de los cuarteles y antigua y nueva nomenclatura de las calles*, México: Antigua litografía Debrey, 1889; *Plano que representa las calles compuestas en el semestre de enero a junio de 1866*, México, 1866; Ángel M. del Puerto y Vicario and José Luis Morali, *Demarcación de manzanas que comprende los 8 cuarteles mayores, y 32 menores en que está dividida la Ciudad de México . . .*, México, tip. Vicente García Torres, 1853.

with Avenida de Chapultepec and running south, parallel streets have the names of states of Mexico, with an occasional city. Again, streets running at right, or nearly right angles from the Paseo de la Reforma generally north-south, have the names of cities, mostly European.

Legislation on Street Names. By 1881 the arrangement and nomenclature of the streets had reached a point where it seemed ridiculous to the philosophy of the *científicos* who then in effect governed Mexico under the influence of the positivist school that loved straight lines and mathematical arrangements. In that year José N. Limantour, Regidor of the Ayuntamiento, presented a study of the maze of streets, calling for fewer changes in the street names, more use of numbers, and a better system of house numbers. The Ayuntamiento approved his study and sent it to the Gobierno del Distrito, where the report gathered dust.⁴²

Later, in 1885, Regidor Manuel González Cosío placed a motion before the Ayuntamiento calling for a numerical system for the streets. That body then requested the Comisión de Obras Públicas to do something about the street names. An engineer, then the city engineer, Roberto Gayol, made an elaborate proposal after attacking the existing disarray; and he pointed out the ridiculousness or the pompousness or the unnecessary length of such names as Tumbaburros, Las Mil Maravillas, and of the Parque de la Moneda. He noted the confusion that a foreigner felt in trying to move about the city (and many foreigners were coming — this was the period of the Díaz prosperity based on foreign investments). He noted that even the numbers on the houses offered the same confusion, with one number sometimes repeated on the same block. He deplored the frequent changes in the names of the streets, citing the case of a new suburb, the Colonia de Santa María la Ribera, only twenty years old, and yet whose street names already had changed, some for shorter, others for longer terms.⁴³ It likewise seemed unreasonable that a city with 973 streets should have only

⁴² "Dictamen de la 2a Comisión especial de concejales . . .," p. 64 in Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México, *Documentos relativos a la nomenclatura de calles y numeración de casas de la Ciudad de México*, México: Tip. La Europea, 1904.

⁴³ Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México, *Documentos relativos a la nomenclatura de calles y numeración de casas de la Ciudad de México*, pp. 5-7.

608 names, especially when some names repeated as many as ten times.⁴⁴

As a remedy he proposed to choose two intersecting streets as axes, dividing them into sub-names, North, South, the other into East-West, and bearing numbers as well as names, and numbering the streets from the intersection with one of the axes. For some of the short streets and streets on the cul-de-sac principle, he had a more elaborate system with capital letters. One of the advantages he pointed out was that then they would need fewer street signs.

A new concept brought in was to name all streets going East and West *Avenidas*. All going North and South were to be called *Calles*.

The axes suggested were the line of Santa Isabel and San Juan de Letrán for the North-South line, and the East-West line was to follow San Andrés, Santa Clara, and Tacuba Streets. This made the Plaza de la Constitución the center of the city, although at that time the city was expanding more to the west than in any other direction.

For the necessary changes Engineer Gayol estimated that about 1200 signs would place the necessary name-signs on the corners. He recommended white letters in relief on a blue background, porcelain finish, at about two pesos each, or 3,600 pesos required for making the change. He also recommended house numbers of the same type, which would cost from 31¢ to \$1.75, depending on the number of ciphers.

The Ayuntamiento of Mexico accepted this plan in general, only changing the axes to the North-South lines of Santa Isabel and Puente de la Mariscal (traditionally a sort of center of town). In addition to names the streets were to have numbers, streets on the North or East streets would have odd numbers; those on the South or West streets would have even numbers, running from the axis. Within the street, and beginning at the axis, house numbers should begin with odd numbers on the right, even on the left. The numbers should run in intervals of five meters each, whether or not a door occupied the site. Each block was to contain one section of one hundred possible numbers.

⁴⁴ Mancera, Gabriel, *Dos ensayos de nomenclatura alfabética y de numeración para la Ciudad de México y para las que se le asemejan*, México: Imp. Fernando Camacho, 1895, p. 1.

A commission was to be set up to work out the new names and numbers, and changes were to be published daily as decided upon. In the meantime the old names and numbers could be used until the new terms were generalized. For the purposes of the change, the Comisión de Hacienda set up a budget of \$600 per month, beginning January 17, 1888.⁴⁵

Once the Ayuntamiento opened the way for changes, a variety of schemes was offered in competition with that of Gayol. One of the most ingenious was a proposal by Gabriel Mancera.⁴⁶ He proposed to re-name the streets by a system in which the name itself would contain elements that would locate its part of the city. North-south streets would have names beginning with vowels. East-west streets would have names beginning with consonants. Then instead of 608 names they would have only 300 or at most 500. As usual he placed the point of departure at the Puente de la Mariscalá, San Andrés, and Santa Isabel. The North-east quadrant would have street names beginning with A, the South-east quadrant with E, the Southwest with I, and the Northwest with O. Moving from the axis, the second letter of the name would have successively letters of the alphabet: Ebro, Ecatepec, Edinburgo, etc., or Boadicea, Bocoris, Bolívar, Bósporo, etc. This system was further elaborated so that the name would make it possible to spot streets on a sort of X-Y grid.

A variation also proposed by Mancera followed Gayol's classification of *Avenidas* and *Calles*, but added four other types of streets: the *Pasaje* for short streets, *Lado* for the area about a square, *Callejón cerrado* for dead-end streets and the *Rinconada* for turns in the streets. Since these suggestions were offered freelance, without official sanction, they received short-shrift from both the Ayuntamiento and the citizenry.

The result of this new movement was a confusion that began as soon as the first list of new street names came out and continued to grow as new lists appeared. Although the post office was kept abreast of the daily list of the changes, it could only attempt to overcome the trouble caused by two sets of addresses, the new and

⁴⁵ For a list of the new names compared with the old nomenclature, see Adolfo Barreiro, *Nomenclaturas comparadas de las calles de la Ciudad de México*, México: Antigua Imprenta de Murguía, 1889. 80 pages. See also footnote 41.

⁴⁶ Mancera, Gabriel, *Dos ensayos . . .*, pp. 1-15.

the old. Moreover, the funds set up for purchase of the new street signs was inadequate, and the erection of the new signs progressed slowly, so that ten years later still not all streets had the new signs.

Meantime, January 6, 1893, the Dirección de Obras Públicas after having erected the street signs with the "new nomenclature" decided to put up signs alongside them showing the "old nomenclature." Thus the reluctance of the citizenry to give up the older names won a first round.

This difficulty persisted for years, and rather than helping avoid confusion, compounded it. Gradually, however, the new house numbers won out, as old numbers disappeared from view, and that became a closed issue. But for the new visitor to the capital in those years as well as to many old residents, an address was a real puzzle. To help out, a variety of guides, pocket size, was printed and widely distributed. They usually gave the "nomenclatura antigua" alphabetical, with the equivalent in the "nomenclatura nueva," and vice versa.

To add to the difficulty, the capital continued to grow in size, adding new suburbs, especially south of the Calzada de la Reforma. These local citizens gave their own choice of names in a most helter-skelter fashion, and without any official authorization. Moreover, the streets did not run North-south or East-west as provided for in plans, so that the Plan of Gayol could not be rationally followed. On October 17, 1899, the Ayuntamiento entered the fray with a plea to designate the newer streets with numbers and the designation North-east, South-west, etc. The result was a conflict with the citizens who continued to use the "nomenclatura nominal," in particular favoring the names of European cities for street names.⁴⁷

At last in August, 1903, the President himself entered the field and ordered a new commission set up to study the situation and to recommend a remedy.⁴⁸

The commission studied the problem and found itself divided into two points of view. The old nomenclature was called the nominal, and the new system was called the numerical, and much printer's ink went into the discussions.

⁴⁷ Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México, *Documentos relativos a la nomenclatura* . . . , pp. 69-70.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

The adherents of the nominal system pointed out several other great cities of the world that had approximately the same problem but kept it — Paris and Berlin being the two most illustrious examples, but with London included at times. The North American cities mentioned had the same problem, the old names were kept — only new additions came in for the numerical systems.

To the charge that some of these streets bore “ridiculous” names, again other cities could be cited that had the same faults. Even the proponents of the nomenclature nominal allowed for certain reforms or changes: they did not object to making enough changes that a street might have the same name as long as it pursued a straight course; they admitted that a name should not be used for more than one street; they objected to ridiculous names or names of animals in the future. They agreed that streets should not be named for persons still alive, and they agreed to reserve to the Ayuntamiento the right to name the streets.

Further, the proponents of the numerical system pointed out that the use of the terms *Avenidas* and *Calles* depending on the direction of the street would result in having the elevated term *Avenida* applied to small and insignificant streets, while some main thoroughfares would have the lesser term of *Calle*.

The final result of the study by this commission:

1. To keep in the main the old nomenclature, with some specific changes: Streets following a straight line were to have only one name, the most popular and dignified. Not two streets should have the same name. New streets should remain without names, only to have numbers, until the Ayuntamiento gave them names of persons, events, etc.

2. The Ayuntamiento reserved the right to give names to the streets.

3. The double signs were to be changed to single signs, leaving the approved name, usually the old one.

4. House numbers were to be changed to a successive system, even and odd on opposite sides.

The report was presented to the Ayuntamiento December 10, 1903, and passed to City Engineer Gayol for study and recommendation. This engineer had not changed his mind during the intervening ten years and disagreed with the findings of the commission, which consisted of Nicolas Mariscal, J. Galindo y Villa, and Miguel

Quevedo. Instead, he sent a new set of *Observaciones* in which he complained that the old system had not worked because the Ayuntamiento had not furnished either enough money or energy to make the plan a success. He further claimed that not even the members of the Ayuntamiento had insisted on using the new nomenclature in their official correspondence. Further, he took up each point of the defense of the nomenclature nominal and reduced it by logical reasoning.

This study was again taken up by the Ayuntamiento, and a second commission was appointed to examine the matter. This commission turned in a lengthy report on May 31, 1904, in which it summarized the arguments and possible plans.⁴⁹ In general the line followed those of earlier reports, but it added a new thought in that the *nomenclature nominal* required shorter addresses, for the name of a short street fixed the location of the destination closely, while for a long street with the other system the address had more confusing numbers and left a wider chance for error. This second commission finally concluded and recommended several possible steps:

1. The *Nomenclatura nominal* in general should be kept.
2. Abolish the system approved December 27, 1887, except for a few specified reforms. (They could change ridiculous names, names that appeared more than once; they could extend the main name to a street that changed several times; they could number the blocks as well as houses.)
3. Each change in the name of a street was to follow an individual study of the particular name: changes were to be accompanied by a ceremony, and only the Ayuntamiento could effect a change.
4. House numbers changed by the 1887 order were again to be changed, following a strictly numerical order, but with even and odd numbers on opposite sides.
5. The city was to bear the cost of making the changes in street signs and house numbers.

The study of the commission was considerably aided by the results of a survey they made to determine how much use was being made of the old and new nomenclature.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-85.

Antonio Sola, who was in charge of the Administración de Rentas Municipales for twenty-five years, reported that still in 1904 the utility bills and tax assessments for water and paving were kept according to the *nomenclatura antigua*. The new nomenclature was used mostly in addition to the other in order to distinguish two otherwise identical addresses.⁵⁰

The Dirección General de Telégrafos Federales reported that for the last two-year period the addresses used were as follows:

Address:	January 1903	January 1904
<i>Nomenclatura antigua</i>	783	1,033
<i>Nomenclatura nueva</i>	6	11
Public Buildings	253	224
Mixed	1	0
Totals:	1,043	1,268 ⁵¹

The head of the Inspección General reported that his office had never used the new nomenclature.⁵²

The head of the postoffice reported that in 1888, the first year of the new system, only 10 per cent of the mail followed the new system, dropping the next few years until by 1903 it was rarely encountered on letters.⁵³

As a result of these inquiries and replies it was obvious that the old system of nomenclature would persist unless some very firm action, contrary to public will, were employed.

Legislative action then gradually became a dead-letter, and the old names continued as before. In a few years more the Revolution of 1910 brought all such discussion to a halt, and names remained under the *nomenclatura antigua* until 1923.

The 20th Century. For Mexico the 19th Century continued until 1910. Only after that date do we find the beginning of a new era. In 1923 the Revolution was a succes, and its leaders were heroes. As a result, and in celebration of the centennial of Mexican Independence, a new series of changes was ordered for certain streets, to honor such persons as Francisco I. Madero and other recent heroes, the Constitution of 1917, and other trade marks of the

⁵⁰ Sala to Gil Best y Iturbe, January 29, 1904, in *ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

⁵¹ Camilo A. González to Srs. Best, Iturbe, and Gil, México, January 30, 1904 in *ibid.*, pp. 135-136.

⁵² Carlos Villegas to Best, Gil, and Iturbe, January 30, 1904, in *ibid.*, p. 136.

⁵³ N. Domínguez to Best, Iturbe, and Gil, México, February 1, 1904, in *ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

new regime. During that period of relative peace, after 1924, the city expanded in all directions.

During this rapid expansion new suburbs opened up, mostly called *colonias*. Some were older towns simply swallowed up, while in other cases ranches or haciendas on the outskirts were taken over as new developments. Some of these *colonias* were planned by architects and real estate agents, and the names applied follow some logic.⁵⁴

For example the Colonia de Santa María la Ribera started out with North-South streets named for trees: El Encino, El Olivo, El Álamo, El Chopo, El Pino, El Ciprés, El Naranjo, El Sabino, El Fresno, and El Olmo. The streets going east-west were named for flowers: La Violeta, La Magnolia, La Mosqueta, La Camelia, La Rosa, and el Heliotropo. However, when the railroad station was built on the grounds in 1883, streets were rearranged, and some names changed.⁵⁵

In the Colonia de Guerrero we find four of the planets used as names: Venus, Neptuno, Urano, Jupiter.⁵⁶

In the Colonia de la Teja where street construction began in 1904, the North-South streets have the names of foreign rivers: Neva, Amazonas, Rhin, Sena, Danubio, Misisippi, etc., while the northeast-southwest streets have the names of Mexican rivers: Lerma, Pánuco, Nazas, and Balsas.⁵⁷

Another interesting case is the Colonia Valle Gómez, whose outlines began as early as 1889, but the system of street names was not presented to the Ayuntamiento until 1902. Here the north-south streets are named after famous mines: Bolaños, Mellado, Pozos, Fresno, Catorce, Tetela del Oro, Veta Grande, etc., while the east-west streets are named for the minerals extracted from those mines: Aluminio, Cobre, Estaño, Platino, Plomo, Radio, and Zino.⁵⁸

A less piquant arrangement is that of the Colonia Juárez, whose streets have names of foreign cities, both directions.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Salvador Diego Fernández, "La Ciudad de México a fines del siglo XIX," in *Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística*, XLV (1935-1936) 447-471. Also T. Philip Terry, *Terry's Guide to Mexico*, Revised Edition, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1923, pp. 233-234.

⁵⁵ José Lorenzo Cossío Sr., "Colonias de esta capital," in *Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística*, XLVI (1937) 15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33. Also Terry's *Guide to Mexico*, p. 257.

The Colonia Romero Rubio, which became part of the city in 1907, has east-west streets named for provinces of larger political units: Transval, Siberia, Persia, Mesopotamia, etc., while the north-south streets have the names of cities of the Orient.

The old Hacienda de la Asunción has now been broken up into the new Colonia de Santa Julia, whose streets north-south have the names of the Latin American Republics, while the east-west streets have simple ordinal numbers: Primera Avenida, Segunda Avenida, etc.

The Colonias Roma and Condesa have streets named for Mexican states and cities. The Colonia Cuauhtémoc has streets named for rivers. The Colonia San Rafael has streets named for men of all nations. In the vicinity of the new Palacio Legislativo the streets have the names of the *diputados* who framed the original Constitution of 1857.⁶⁰ The other *colonias* show a certain amount of plan, but their street names are mostly the names of persons, or the system is so broken that no pattern is clear.

With the advance of the century the desire for changing names has not abated. Each new period of fervent political activity brings as its after effect a rash of new names, such as the changes of 1921.⁶¹

Another aspect of the names of the last century and a half, especially popular in Latin America, is the habit of calling the streets after some intangible concept or holiday. It is easy to see the pertinency of a plaza named for the Constitution or for Independence, but the Latin Americans have gone so much farther that they have named streets for famous dates: El 18 de Septiembre in commemoration of the beginning of the War for Independence, El Cinco de Mayo in honor of the battle won on that day against the French in 1862, the Paseo de la Reforma in honor of the movement and War of 1857–1860. But most foreigners find the most whimsical of the new names in the Calle del Artículo 123, in honor of that part of the new Constitution of 1917. And while the foreigner stands amazed at the profusion of names and depends on frequent solicitation to find his way, the native population goes on merrily about its business, living with the old names and rejecting, assimilating, or adding the new names on a highly personal basis if changes do not come too fast, and fitting them into its stride. The confusion is mostly resented by foreigners and planners.

⁶⁰ Terry's *Guide to Mexico*, p. 257.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 257.