

Names of Ohio's Streams

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IN HUMID OHIO, streams are such a commonplace landscape feature that the passing traveler is hardly aware of their presence when he crosses one. In early years, however, the frontiersmen paid particular attention to creeks and rivers. For one thing, small streams could be used at that time for navigation by canoe. Lewis Evans' account of Ohio in 1755 noted the presence of rapids and waterfalls that might impede travel by water. Furthermore, the pioneer settler often selected the land for his farm with water supply in mind, appropriating the fertile, moist, but well-drained bottom lands for pasture or cultivation. To him, the springs, creeks, forks, runs, branches, or brooks were great assets on any farm. Property that included some river frontage might also make travel easier than over the difficult "traces" by land, and a small cascade could be used to operate mills powered by flowing streams.

The total number of Ohio's streams is not known, though a recent publication¹ lists about 3,300 watercourses, for which information was obtained from 246 United States Geological Survey topographic quadrangles covering the entire state. This single source of information, valuable as it is, falls short of naming all Ohio streams. If in addition to the quadrangles, maps of the state highway department and county surveyors and a wide selection of other sources are studied, Ohio streams mount to 4,158 in number, of which 2,863, or 68.8 per cent, are names about which there is little question of accuracy. These streams bear names having little or no variation in spelling and their geographic characteristics such as direction, length, and point of confluence commonly are defined without challenge by local informants or sources. The observations and conclusions as stated in this paper are based upon these 2,863 names, and it is believed that this number is sufficiently large to yield valid results.

¹ *Gazetteer of Ohio Streams*. Ohio, Department of Natural Resources, Division of Water, Columbus, 1954.

Generic Distributions

Most geographic names are comprised of two parts — the generic portion, and the specific name that distinguishes a particular feature from others in that vicinity. In Ohio, the two generic terms most widely used are “run,” and “creek.” These two comprise 80 per cent of the total generic usage, with “fork,” “branch,” and “ditch” used in smaller numbers. Miscellaneous generic terms include river, brook, lick, hollow, swale, prong, slough, cutoff, drain, and canal.

“River” is a generic term reserved for larger streams. Of the others, “creek” as it is used in southern states refers to a stream of low velocity, while “run” is commonly used for swifter streams. In Ohio the use of “run” is almost wholly limited to the southern two-thirds of the state, an area corresponding very closely to the counties within which “fork” is also used (see accompanying map). Both “run” and “fork” are expressions found mainly in the southern states. The former is in widespread use in the Allegheny Plateau section of Pennsylvania, where, as in Ohio and West Virginia, Scotch-Irish frontiersmen were important elements in the pioneer population.² “Fork” is a common term in Kentucky and West Virginia, but almost unused in Pennsylvania and not found at all in New England. Both these terms, reaching Ohio from southern sources, provide clues to the northern limits of Ohio’s settlement by southerners, or the extent to which southern cultural and speech traditions prevailed in this part of the Northwest Territory. “Branch” and “lick” are more strongly southern in usage and barely cross the Ohio River, to be used only in the southern third of Ohio.

In contrast to terms of southern origin, “brook” is found mainly in the lake shore counties. This generic is of New England origin, for the word is almost unused outside that area and the northern third of Pennsylvania, which was settled from Connecticut. In Ohio, therefore, the word “brook” connotes New England settlement origins. It is significant that the term is almost wholly restricted to the counties of Connecticut’s Western Reserve. Of the two remaining generics, “creek” is in such widespread and common use in this state that its distribution has no significance for this paper.

² Wilbur Zelinsky, “Some Problems in the Distribution of Generic Terms in the Place-Names of the Northeastern United States,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 45 : 319–349, December 1955.

The term "ditch" has a special significance in Ohio, and its use is limited to the northwestern quarter of the state, mainly within the area known originally as the Black Swamp. These ditches represent the faint natural drainage channels that have been deepened in efforts to drain surplus water from swampy low ground; thus they are features primarily of cultural origin and of late date, appearing on Ohio maps in the years after 1830 when the Black Swamp was gradually converted into farmland.

In summary, then, the distribution of stream generics in Ohio aids in determining the zone of northern penetration of those settlers who came from the south, as indicated by the northern limits of the use of "run," "fork," "branch," and "lick". This information is supported by the map of the area in which "brook" is used, since the southern limit of that term denotes the extent of New England settlement in northern Ohio.

Distribution and Types of Specific Parts of Names

The part of the stream name that distinguishes one creek or fork from its neighbors — the specific designation — falls into six leading categories: personal and ethnic, 38 per cent; local incident, 14 per cent; associative, 13 per cent; descriptive, 12 per cent; geographical, 10 per cent, and botanical, 8 per cent.

Personal and Ethnic Names. The high proportion of personal (or family) names suggests an intimate relationship between the frontier settler and his land, as well as a certain element of recognition of property rights related to the presence of streams. Many of these personal names are used in the singular possessive form, though current practice normally omits the apostrophe when the stream name appears on maps. One type of personal or possessive name is that originating with Ohio Indian tribes. These names may be tribal in character (that is, non-personal), like "Muskingum", or they may recognize an individual, like "White Eyes." They are not numerous, comprising only 4 per cent of the total stream names, but they do include the names of our largest rivers. For some reason, possibly due to difficulties of spelling or pronunciation, the frontier settler seldom retained the aboriginal names of streams, preferring to substitute names that were more meaningful to him.

MAP NO. C0533—OHIO



Approximate southern limits of the use of the generic "brook" (1) and "ditch" (2); approximate northern limits of the use of the generic "run" (3), "fork" (4), "branch" (5) and "lick" (6). Base map used by courtesy of the George F. Cram Company.

Commemorative Names. Ohio stream nomenclature often commemorates some local incident, not necessarily of great historical importance. These occurrences were often indicative of some recognition of animal or bird life. "Turkey Creek," for example, may have been so named because these birds were found along the stream in large numbers, or because one was killed there, or because a flock of wild turkeys was encountered suddenly along that creek. In any case, a local incident became commemorated by the name given the watercourse. Thus local incidents and personal names together account for more than half the stream names in Ohio.

Very few names commemorating historical incidents of national scope, or names derived from literature, have been applied to Ohio's streams, and only three streams bear the names of saints. Furthermore, only 26 streams bear "transfer" names — that is, names of streams outside of Ohio, like "Brandywine Creek."

Associative Names. The next group, in descending order of size, is the name category in which associative designations are used. These names for streams include many references to plant life such as trees, scrub or brush vegetation cover, flowers, grass, and plant associations. Of the trees, those names most frequently in use include, in order of importance, plum, pine or piney, walnut, cedar, sycamore, willow, poplar, crabapple or apple, and oak. Spruce, butternut, hickory, alder, leatherwood, cherry, peach, hemlock, tamarack, maple, ash, elm, and beech are found infrequently, though maple may appear indirectly in the use of the associative name "sugar," which is common in this state. The distributions of these plant names seem to have some interesting relationships to the distributions of native plants in Ohio, but that subject is too broad for adequate treatment here.

Other widely-used associative names, in order of repetition frequency, are lick, mill, sugar, brush or brushy, salt, spring, honey, prairie, and coal.

Descriptive Names. It is surprising that names applied to our streams are not as highly descriptive as they might be. Even when a descriptive name is used, it commonly lacks distinction or imagination — a fact borne out by our repeated duplication of "Mud Creek" or "Rocky Fork." Ohio pioneers were seldom poetic or high-flown in their choice of descriptions. We have 41 each of "Big," "Dry," and "Mud" creeks; 33 "Rocky" or "Rock," 20 "Clear," 19 "Long,"

18 "Stony" or "Stone," 12 "Crooked," and 6 "Pleasant" creeks in Ohio. The possibilities for map confusion are endless, particularly when Belmont County has three Brush creeks, Henry County has three Turkey creeks, Jefferson County has three Goose creeks, and Muskingum County has three Salt creeks. Scioto County takes the high score for repetitiousness with six Lick creeks, four Buck and four Bear creeks, and two each of Laurel, Spruce, and Duck creeks.

Geographical Names. Nearly ten per cent of Ohio's stream names are of geographical nature, though possibly these names might be considered descriptive in character. They are, however, sufficiently numerous to justify special attention. Two groups may be recognized: those referring to compass direction, and those expressing a geographic relationship to other streams. In the first group, "East," used 56 times, "North," used 47 times, "West," used 41 times, and "South," used 35 times, represent a high element of repetition. In fact, "East" is the most common designation for our creeks, topping all other names numerically, either by itself as in "East Fork," or in combination as "East Mud Creek." In the second group, "Middle" is applied to 23 streams and "Center" to six streams. "Left" and "Right" are used a few times.

Other Names. Other stream names, widely diversified in character but few in number (5 per cent of the total) include synthetic or manufactured names, whimsical or joke names, and names transferred from some other feature, such as Hinckley Pond Brook.

Conclusions

Stream names on the present-day map of Ohio portray the geography of the state as it must have appeared to the earliest white settlers, for it is their names that are still in use — stream names that honor a local resident or suggest a long-past incident of the frontier. From some stream names it is possible to detect traces of the original vegetation and wildlife. From others we may recognize those features that were important to the pioneer, like the salt licks that are represented so abundantly in the names of Ohio streams. Such names have proved to be persistent, in use for over a century and a half without change, even though incidents and individuals have been forgotten by most people and in spite of extensive changes in the natural landscape. How long has it been since we

could call a stream "Turkey Creek" because wild turkeys were abundant along its banks?

Ohio's stream names, perhaps more than any other place name category, reflect early conditions of the natural landscape accurately and simply. That simplicity is striking. Towns and townships were named for Rome, Carthage, or Attica, but such high-sounding nomenclature was ill-suited for Ohio's streams of the frontier, where "Beaver Creek," "Elk Run," or "Doan Brook" filled the need of the pioneer for identification of this feature of the environment. Today we continue to use his unpretentious and homely relic names though the geographical and historical conditions that gave rise to the sensible stream names have long been changed to a greater degree of complexity. It is fortunate that present maps, at least in the designations of their watercourses, retain the early-day flavor of pioneer life so that we may be reminded of the fact that this land once was known for its clear creeks, pleasant creeks, and grassy creeks; its mill brooks, bear creeks, and goose creeks, and its whetstones, slate, paint, or salt creeks. Those names were important to Ohio's settlers, and we have no better memorial to their early enterprise.

Kent State University

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IN MEMORIAM. At the ripe old age of ninety-five Henry Raup Wagner died in San Marino, California, on March 27, 1957. His bibliography, *The Plains and the Rockies*, the great cartographical work, *The Cartography of the Northwest Coast of America*, and numerous other works of interest to geographers, historians and onomatologists placed him in the front ranks of American scholars.