

The Problem of a National Gazetteer

GAZETTEER IS A TERM of widely varying significance. It may be—but seldom is—a complete name list for a country, state, or region. Frequently it is employed for a mere finding list of the names on one set of maps. Again, it may resemble the new Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer of the World, which perforce cannot include all names, but does include all names within certain fixed limits as to importance or population, as well as many cross references. In the following discussion the term “national gazetteer” will be considered as a national list of names that will be as complete as possible, including all geographic names on all sorts of maps and sources that are known to exist at a given date. It must contain sufficient details to provide a rapid location of any name, and preferably should list the variants in cases of name conflict. The scope of this supplementary information for each name is, of course, a secondary matter, and can be determined with relative ease whenever it may be decided that a national gazetteer is to be undertaken.

The Sixth Report in 1932 of the U. S. Board on Geographic Names, in commenting on the completion of the “Official Gazetteer of the State of Rhode Island (1932),” has the following paragraph about a national gazetteer:

It is hoped, when all the State gazetteers have been published, to gather these up in one volume which will serve as a National gazetteer. With some of the State boards now engaged in the compilation of State gazetteers, and with the appropriation by Congress of money for the publication of the gazetteer of Rhode Island, it is believed that the groundwork for the eventual publication of a national gazetteer has been laid.

This optimistic forecast has remained a vain hope. Only one state has published a complete name list since 1932 (Maryland, 1941, plus supplement in 1947). Valuable volumes dealing primarily with the origin and history of names have been published for California, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota and West Virginia, but they do not meet the test of completeness. The names in several other states had been partially listed in works appearing before 1932 (Arizona, Iowa, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Wash-

ington), while some aspects of the names in a few other states have been dealt with in magazine articles or pamphlets. Of interest in this connection is the item about the proposed dictionary of Connecticut names on page 134 of *Names* (June 1953), and there are doubtless similar projects in other states. The writer feels that the encouragement of such local or statewide studies should be one of the primary aims of the American Name Society.

Today there is no official publication, or set of publications, which offer any comprehensive help in name location in the United States. If the Rand McNally Commercial Atlas and a few other private publications were to be removed from our shelves, those of us who have to do with geographic name work would be at a complete loss in locating minor settlements and natural features. This neglect of the domestic field has continued during a period when, because of changed world conditions, comprehensive name lists for many foreign countries have been made by official agencies. Today it is easier to locate a name in Thailand than in the United States, insofar as aid from governmental sources is concerned. Why has such neglect of the home areas prevailed, with no prospect of any remedy in the foreseeable future?

One very manifest reason is the tremendous size of the undertaking. While no precise estimate is possible, it is believed that a complete name list for the continental United States would require not less than one million entries.

Secondly, the urgency of the need for a national gazetteer may be open to question. At present it is not too difficult, nor impossible, to get along with the excellent nonofficial publications mentioned above, plus governmental lists of limited character like the Postal Guide and Census lists.

A third principal reason is that the country is not yet completely mapped by any large-scale coverage other than the county highway maps, which vary greatly in thoroughness of name representation. The gradual extension of the 7½-minute topographic quadrangle maps has brought to light many thousands of names previously unrecorded but in everyday local use. About 50 years ago the U. S. Geological Survey published "gazetteers" for some 12 states, listing principally the names on its 15-minute or smaller-scale quadrangles issued to that time. Today these lists are very inadequate, while a national gazetteer compiled from all maps existing on Jan-

uary 1, 1953, would soon need supplements to keep its name coverage comprehensive and current.

The tentative figure of one million names for the entire country is not merely a guess, but has some slight basis in fact. It is an approximation based on ratio between the number of names in the 1932 Rhode Island gazetteer, compiled under the guidance of the U. S. Board on Geographic Names, and the number of inhabited place and natural features listed for that state in the Rand McNally Commercial Atlas. Applying this ratio to all the other states, a total of about 650,000 names is secured. While Rand McNally has a very complete coverage for inhabited places, it lists relatively few natural features for each state, and in many states these vastly outnumber the former category. Consequently, it is believed that at least an additional 50 per cent of names should be allowed for, bringing the total to almost one million. Involved in the question of size are other factors, such as cross references for names that vary in form or in spelling, or the names of postoffices, railway stations and incorporated places that differ from the commonly accepted names of the communities in which they are situated.

One million single-line entries would call for about 6,000 pages with 160 lines to the double main-column page. This would mean six to eight volumes, according to the paper used. The dimension of the pages would depend upon the amount of information provided in the various sub-columns.

According to the article about the Canadian Board on Geographic Names in the June issue of *Names*, the Canadian Government is adopting the gradual approach to this problem. It is stated that the Board hopes to publish gazetteers of names in the various provinces until the entire country is covered. Our Board manifestly hoped in 1932 that state gazetteers modeled on the one for Rhode Island would be published in a like gradual manner. Whatever approach is adopted to the compilation of a national gazetteer, it seems obvious that for a project of this magnitude there should be a maximum degree of cooperation between State authorities and any central or Federal agency, but that the latter would be essential to coordinate efforts, to insure uniformity in procedure, and to make sure that the same standards of accuracy and completeness were applied throughout the country.

In the course of a year the writer receives several hundred in-

quiries about names in the United States and foreign countries, usually having to do with their location and sometimes with other aspects such as their origin. Existing facilities, officially or privately published, provide answers in nearly all instances, but at times considerable ingenuity is needed. For instance, during the war the Maritime Commission asked about a name mentioned in a cable from one of its vessels that was taking on a supply of fuel oil at the place in question. Not even the continent was given. After some search, a similar name differing in only one letter was found in Iran, but about ten or twelve miles inland. Although this small town seemed highly improbable as the answer, in the end it turned out to be correct, since there was a newly developed oil field that had installed a pipeline to the coast where no settlement existed, and for want of any other name the discharge end of the pipeline had been given the name of the town. A recent inquiry asked for the location of "Binta Lake, in Canada." The name is not in the Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer, but was found in the London Times World Gazetteer. Eventually the actual lake was found named on a road map of British Columbia. Not infrequently inquiries contain only a general location, such as the Atlantic or Gulf Coasts, without mention of a state.

When special facilities and well assembled reference works are available, it is thus not too hard to find a name in nearly all instances, but the general public does not have access to such specialized sources. A national gazetteer would solve this problem with ease and facility for all names in the United States, but it is impossible to escape the underlying question of whether the general need for it is sufficient to warrant the cost of its compilation and publication.

In a previous article the writer called attention to the many new names resulting from large-scale mapping of the coastal strip along the Gulf of Mexico, with particular reference to a part of the west coast of Florida (*Names*, June 1953, pages 109-110). Equally surprising were the results in a long-settled area like the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Early in the 1940s new 7½-minute topographic quadrangles were made of this region. In one limited area covered by seven of the older 15-minute quadrangles there were found to be 433 names on published maps (nautical charts, quadrangles, Post Route Map, county maps, etc.). As the result of a thorough

field investigation of the names in this area, 698 additional names were found to be in current local use, or many more than the previous name coverage.

The 1941 Gazetteer of Maryland (Maryland Geological Survey) is perhaps the most complete state name list that has been published (the Rhode Island volume does not give latitude and longitude). It follows the system of main entries for each feature listed, with descriptive locations, population figures, latitude and longitude, and the names of the quadrangles on which the features may be found. There are also cross references for varying forms of all these main entries. The latter are taken from the older U. S. Geological Survey 15-minute quadrangles and from the county maps of the Maryland Geological Survey of contemporary date. Additional simple entries of names are made, with the location limited to the county and with no other details. There are 5140 principal complete entries, 1245 names with limited location, and 1550 cross references. The total of live names is thus 6385. The number of cross references is to be noted, as showing the importance of this category of entries in the size of a complete gazetteer. The 1904 gazetteer of the state, compiled by the U. S. Geological Survey, contained 3183 names, half of the 1941 list.

In 1947 the Maryland State Planning Commission issued a "Manual of Coordinates for Places in Maryland." This new list includes much of the new larger scale mapping of the state subsequent to 1940, and contains about 12,000 names, or almost twice as many as the 1941 list. In passing, it is of interest to note that this 1947 pamphlet employs the grid coordinate system rather than latitude and longitude, and appears to be unique in this respect.

It may well be asked how these unpublished names maintain themselves. The persistence of names from generation to generation by word of mouth is at times amazing, but is a well-established phenomenon. It is difficult to estimate the size of this reservoir of unpublished names that are discovered only through a thorough field investigation when a region is mapped on so large a scale that there is space to apply practically all of the names found to be in actual use. Evidence of their existence in other states could easily be furnished in support of the examples cited above for the Gulf States and for Maryland.

Not the least of the problems calling for solution is that of how

to list conflicting names or forms of names. In spite of the many decisions of the United States Board on Geographic Names, there are still many thousands of name conflicts of various sorts. If only a single entry is to be permitted for each inhabited place or natural feature, to decide upon the name to be listed would be a major operation. Even if cross references are used, there still remains the problem of determining which of the varying names is entitled to the principal listing. A very conservative estimate of such name conflicts is 25,000.

In conclusion, one is brought face to face with the question of whether there is vital need for a national gazetteer that would englobe all geographic names within the continental United States (there are complete or fairly complete lists for Alaska, Hawaiian Islands and the Virgin Islands of the United States). Such a work would be extremely useful, but because of its size would have to be limited largely to public or other reference libraries. If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, there then arises the question of *when* such a major task should be undertaken. In the present incomplete status of the large-scale mapping of the United States, a complete listing of all names published to the present time would contain only a part of the real total of all names in actual use throughout the country. Perhaps the delay in starting a national gazetteer is not an unmixed evil, since the longer it is put off the more names there will be to put into it.

The above article was submitted by our charter member Lewis Heck, Chief of Geographic Names Section, Chart Division, U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. Its publication was approved by the Office of Public Information, Department of Commerce. See Editors Page in this issue.



The history of many cities has been deciphered from inscriptions, and so the history of Old London may, much of it, be deciphered from the inscriptions which we find written up at the corners of its streets. These familiar names, which catch the eye as we pace the pavement, perpetually remind us of the London of bygone centuries, and recall the stages by which the long unlovely avenues of street have replaced the elms and hedgerows, and have spread over miles of pleasant fields, till scores of outlying villages have been absorbed into a "boundless contiguity" of brick and mortar.

—Isaac Taylor