

Center vs. Centre

H. F. RAUP

CERTAIN FADS HAVE PREVAILED in naming places in the United States during the last century and a half. One, well-known to place-name researchers, strewed names of foreign origin over North American maps in the early 19th century. Peculiar stylistic tendencies reflected editorial policy or whims of cartographers. One of these fads involved changes in the spelling of the word *center* or *centre*. There is no adequate explanation for this change in orthography unless it is simply a change in fashion—a literary or cartographic oddity of the Victorian period.

Early use of the term by Chaucer in 1374 followed the form *centre*, probably the outgrowth of its origin from the Latin *centrum* and the French *centre*, from which source the word entered the English language. Prevailing spelling from the 16th to the 18th centuries was *center* (Shakespeare used this form in 1600), but subsequently the English preferred usage reverted to the Chaucerian *centre*. In America, *centre* was used in 1729, but by the end of the 18th century (1788 and 1791), *center* was the popular spelling. Then early in the 19th century, the cartographers normally used the French *centre* in preparing maps.*

In the light of the enormous influence of Noah Webster and his dictionary upon 19th century American writing, there would be good reason to suspect that he and his colleagues might have been responsible for the persistence of *centre* on maps of the period, but apparently this was not the case. Quoting from his dictionary of 1851 (p. viii),

* See *center, centre* in *A New English Dictionary*, ed. by J. A. H. Murray (Oxford, Clarendon Press), 1893; *The Century Dictionary* (New York, The Century Company), 1890; *A Dictionary of American English* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press), 1938. I am indebted to Dr. Harlan Hungerford for a critical reading of this brief paper.

Nor is it Dr. Webster who is the innovator in this case, but the English mind, which has for two centuries been throwing off a useless encumbrance, and moving steadily on toward greater simplicity in the structure of our language. Such, too, is the case with certain terminations in *re*, pronounced like *er*; as in *centre*, *metre*, etc. We have numerous of this class derived from the French, all of which originally ended in *re*; as *cider* (*cidre*), *chamber* (*chambre*), etc. These have been gradually conformed to the English spelling and pronunciation, till the number in *re* is reduced to not far from twenty words with their derivatives; and in respect to them also the process is still going on. *Center* is, to a considerable extent, the spelling of the best mathematical writers.

In an effort to determine when the changes in orthography occurred, and for what features *center* or *centre* were used, a scanning of 88 geographic features in the state of Ohio bearing the name *center* or *centre* indicated that the term customarily was applied to settlements, most of them small. At least eight Ohio streams and nine Ohio townships as well as one ridge bear or have borne names involving this word. All told, a minimum of 68 settlements make active use of the word in one form or another at the present time. These include several Centervilles, Center Village, Centerfield, Centertown, Centerburg, Center Furnace, Center Station, Belle Center, Bloom Center, Avon Center, Columbia Center, Eaton Center, Berlin Center, Centerview, Center Bend, Clay Center, Bath Center, Allen Center, and Center Belpre. Several of the Centervilles bear alternate names, mostly supplied by the United States postoffice officials to avoid confusion in mail deliveries.

In some parts of Ohio, particularly in the northeastern section in the Connecticut Western Reserve, the plan of survey called for frontier settlements in the center of each five-mile-square township. The resulting settlement distribution gave many township centers the name of the township with "center" added; thus in Portage County, Brimfield Center, Suffield Center, Aurora Center, Freedom Center, Mantua Center and the like. In the last 75 years most of these communities have dropped the "center" from their name, although some have retained it in order to avoid confusion. Mantua *Center*, for example, distinguishes the older settlement from Mantua (which has already dropped "Station" from its name) and Mantua Corners.

Returning to a consideration of the spelling change, evidence from many book and map sources beginning with 1821 and ending

in 1953 indicates that the last use of *centre* was in 1933, but that the last general use was in 1918. No use of this form of the word was noted on any sources published in the last 20 years except when authors were deliberately printing the word as it had appeared in earlier publications.

It would be interesting to speculate whether this French form *centre* was related to the high regard for items of French culture apparent on the frontiers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. An example of this attitude appears in the naming of Marietta, the first permanent white settlement in the present limits of Ohio, whose cognomen honors the unfortunate Marie Antoinette, or the coined name of the French settlement at Gallipolis. The origins of the trend toward *centre* may lie within this realm of American interest in France, but this can hardly be demonstrated with certainty.

The tabulation shows plainly that the use of *centre* was dominant between 1825 and 1880 in Ohio. Within that period only 18 per cent of the occurrences of the word were spelled *center*. Between 1880 and 1920 usage apparently swung away from *centre* in the direction of *center* and during this period both forms were in use, with increasing dominance of the latter.

Regardless of spelling, the fact remains that the word *center* in one form or another, with or without prefixes and suffixes, was regarded favorably in the early days of the westward movement. Its geographical implications are obvious, for it was intended to show that the settlement or township so named enjoyed a prominent location with reference to its immediate surroundings or could be easily reached from all directions. The name, used geographically, also carried a certain element of importance; a stranger coming to a locality might be convinced that as a "center" of activities the place was of greater importance than neighboring settlements. The popularity of the word eventually led to unfortunate duplication and in later years many places bearing the name *center* have not, in fact, lived up to the hopes of their founders and residents. A case in point is the comparative oblivion of the village named Centerburg located at what is reputed to be the geographical center of Ohio in the southwestern part of Knox County. As a community of 887 people it falls far short of the importance implied in its location or name.