

Lucifer's Landholdings in America

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IT WOULD TAKE THE DEVIL'S OWN TIME and tirelessness to track down all the United States terrain features (Rocks, Caves, Lakes, Dens, Punch Bowls, Tea Tables, Half Acres, etc.) listed either in his or in Hell's name. I myself, without going beyond standard road maps, guidebooks, and a random sample of toponymic treatises, have counted upwards of 350 such parcels of Satan's acknowledged property. In American onomastics the Devil not only *owns* a lot of the landscape; he even displays parts of his anatomy here and there for the tourist trade, e.g., humping up his Backbone in at least ten states, turning up his Nose in California and New York, poking out his Thumb from a mountain in Alaska and one of his Horns as a butte in Oregon, pricking up his Ears in North Dakota, bending his Elbow all over the continental United States.

Americans' eagerness to give the Devil his due has even engendered some interstate rivalry, of which a couple of examples may be cited. Missouri, for instance, has its champion in R. L. Ramsay, who writes,

A large proportion of the territory of Missouri . . . is still recognized as the property of the Devil, if place names are sufficient evidence of ownership. More than thirty localities attest the healthy respect we have for His Satanic Majesty. We have the *Devil's Elbow*, the name used for a sharp river bend; one of his *Boots*, in a boot-shaped cave in Warren County; three *Devil's Dens* and two *Devil's Tea Tables*, great smooth flat slabs of rock; a *Devil's Washpan*, *Washboard* and *Wash Basin*. Five pieces of his *Backbone* are found in as many different counties. The *Devil's Toll Gate* stands in a narrow opening at the foot of *Tom Sauk Mountain*; and the *Devil's Race Ground*... was mentioned . . . in the journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.¹

¹ *Our Storehouse of Missouri Place Names* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1952), p. 112.

But California, next to Texas of course, always has the most of everything, Hell's holdings not excepted. "There are in California," says E. G. Gudde, "between 150 and 200 topographic features which are named for the Prince of Darkness. Probably no other state can equal this number."²

I am not so much concerned, however, with which state carries off the honors in Tophetic toponymy as with the contrast between this Devil's plenty and the very meager selection of landscape features attributed to God or any of his unfallen angels. Gently rolling farmland and placid meadow brooks may be privately credited to divine provenience, but let the water foam white, let breathtaking rock formations thrust upward from the ground or multicolored strata paint the walls of a baroque chasm – in short, let the delighted eye be presented with *scenery* – and, if any supernatural agency gets credit for it, the chances are it will bear the hallmark of Hell. Even where, as in the North Dakota badlands, one tract of erosion forms may be called God's Gardens, Hell's Hole is not far away. Nobody seems to have taken up Thoreau's suggestion that Walden Pond be called God's Drop; yet the grateful citizens of South Dakota's Minnehaha County, who have an enchanted glen so lovely that the ordinarily matter-of-fact W. P. A. guidebook speaks of it as "a sanctuary of charm and inspiration," have named it Devil's Gulch, and the natural trail at the head of the ravine the Devil's Stairway. Gudde, to be sure, reports that California has about 50 features (including towns) named either just plain Paradise or Paradise this or that because of their supposed resemblance to the abode of the blest – but to some, he remarks dryly, "the name was no doubt applied in irony."³

George R. Stewart has a theory, which he applies mostly to the West, about this one-sided habit of naming:

² *California Place Names* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), p. 93. Texas, by the way, is one of the seven states in the continental U.S.A. in which I have not yet found any features listed under *Devil* or *Hell*. The others are Alabama, Delaware, Kansas, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 253. The town of Paradise in Butte County, for example, was recorded on the Official Railway Map of 1900 as Paradise, and according to an old story was named for the Pair o' Dice Saloon. Helltown is not far away. Gudde reports, incidentally (p. 11), that Angel Island and Angels Camp were both named for settlers whose family name happened to be Angel.

The Devil's western holdings became varied and numerous. However profane he might be in speech, the American did not apply the name of God to places. When he wished to give any idea of the supernatural, he resorted to the Devil. If the Sioux *wacan* indicated that a body of water was spirit-haunted, the American usually translated it as Devil's Lake. When he saw a mass of columnar basalt so gigantic as to suggest more than human power, it became the Devil's Postpile. More often the idea of the torture of hell was involved, half-humorously. A dike of hard rock projecting from a mountainside often presented a regular curve suggesting a giant slide. But its jagged top also suggested an extremely painful process. So it became the Devil's Slide with the implication that his imps would put poor lost souls to sliding down it.⁴

Such names had been fairly common in the East, but the spectacular western scenery suggested them more frequently. Probably every mountain state has at least one Devil's Canyon. The usage survived into recent enough times to provide the Devil's Golf Course. Hell was often used with much the same ideas as Devil. With the aid of alliteration, any bad stretch of trail or river became Hell's Half-Mile, and any particularly desolate area was Hell's Half Acre.⁵

Now, there may well have been, in both East and West, a touch of bravado in the assigning of diabolic provenience to topographical features; a dash of conscious irreverence; even a bit of schoolboyish perversity, as in writing forbidden words on walls. But I should like to propose an alternative motivation: namely, an uneasy conviction that the Devil really does have much more than squatter's rights to the land lying between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. As a matter of historical record Satan's claim to all American real estate, both wild and improved, is attested by some very eminent authorities.

⁴ In Montana, at least, Satan seems to have been more playful. The W.P.A. guide quotes the following poem about a Devil's Slide on Cinnabar Mountain:

Ages ago, one can easily see,
Old Yellowstone Valley went on a spree;
The mountains had risen, the valleys had sunk,
And old Mother Nature got roaringly drunk.
The Devil, as drunk as the Devil would be,
Slid to the bottom of Cinnabaree.

⁵ *Names on the Land* (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 316.

Puritan theologians thought that "the wicked one in whom the whole world lyeth" (Cotton Mather's phrase) had this continent all to himself from earliest times; that he managed to lure the Indians into his overseas territory so that for a good many centuries at least they could not possibly be exposed to the glorious news of the Evangel. "This American continent," wrote Jonathan Edwards, "... was wholly unknown to all Christian nations till these latter times. It was not known that there was any such part of the world, though it was very full of people: and therefore the devil had this part of the world as it were secure to himself, out of the reach of the light of the gospel, and so out of the way of molestation in his dominion over them. . . . It is certain that the devil did here quietly enjoy his dominion over the poor Indians for many ages."⁶

Once the waves of Christian immigration began to erode his dominion he fought a relentless campaign of harassment and infiltration against the invaders. In 1632 John Winthrop reported a great combat at Watertown between a mouse and a snake, with the mouse emerging victorious. "The pastor of Boston, Mr. Wilson, a very sincere, holy man, hearing of it, gave this interpretation: that the snake was the devil; the mouse was a poor contemptible people, which God had brought hither, which should overcome Satan here, and dispossess him of his kingdom."⁷ Two years later Winthrop noted in his journal that "Satan bestirred himself to hinder the progress of the gospel."⁸ By the end of 1638 the cold war was coming to a furious boil, as "The Devil would never cease to disturb our peace, and to raise up instruments one after another" (a woman at Salem, for example, persistently refused to bow at the name of Jesus). "At Providence, also, the devil was not idle" (husbands there were finding difficulty in controlling their wives). "Another plot the old serpent had against us, by sowing jealousies and differences between us and our friends at Connecticut, and also Plymouth." And early the following year, during a violent hurricane, "The Indians near Aquiday being pawwawing in this tempest, the devil came and fetched away five of them."⁹

⁶ *Works* (London: Ball, Arnold, and Co., 1840), I, 600.

⁷ *Winthrop's Journal*, ed. J. K. Hosmer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), I, 83-84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 121.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 285-297.

Cotton Mather marveled at the divine favor which permitted the Pilgrims and Puritans, despite such a redoubtable enemy, to build churches and settle towns "in a place where, time out of mind, had been nothing before but *Heathenism, Idolatry, and Devil-worship*."¹⁰ Yet neither he nor Jonathan Edwards had any fears as to the ultimate outcome of the struggle between newcomers and original owner, nor did Edwards even respect Satan as a really worthy adversary. "Although the devil be exceeding crafty and subtle," he said, "yet he is one of the greatest fools and blockheads in the world, as the subtlest of wicked men are."¹¹ And Mather, reflecting on the progress made by the Puritans once "the sound of the *silver trumpets of the Gospel*"¹² had been made audible in the land, exclaimed, "Surely of this *work*, and of this *time*, it shall be said, *what hath God wrought? And, this is the Lord's doings, it is marvellous in our eyes! Even so (O Lord) didst thou lead thy people, to make thyself a glorious name!*"¹³

But the glorious naming hasn't always worked out that way, not even in New England. *Towns* could be named for a benevolent creator, like Providence, or for sacred places, like Sharon, Canaan, or Salem; but, just as the Devil notoriously has all the good tunes, the great blockhead still maintains his title to what the road maps call points of interest.

Indeed, the eternal adversary seems more firmly entrenched in Massachusetts than in almost any other eastern state. South of Worcester, in an awesome fissure called Purgatory Chasm, the Devil has a Corn Crib, a Coffin, and one of several Pulpits from which he presumably hurled forth his own *firstly's*, *secondly's*, and *thirdly's* in answer to sermons preached against him by black-clad clergymen in the towns. He has left his cloven Hoofprint in a rock beside the Congregational Building in Ipswich, and two huge Footprints pointing southward, two miles apart, near Upton. Near South Hadley is the Devil's Football, a 300-ton magnetic boulder which Satan is alleged to have kicked from the Devil's Garden at Amherst Notch several miles away.

¹⁰ *Magnalia Christi Americana* (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1855), I, 13.

¹¹ *Works*, II, 612.

¹² *Magnalia*, I, 42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, 13.

¹⁴ He also has a Pulpit on Monument Mountain, and another on a ledge overlooking the Deerfield River.

Offshore, on No Man's Land, a small island eight miles from Martha's Vineyard, the Devil has a rocky Bed and Pillow. And at Gay Head, on the Vineyard itself, a bowl-shaped depression in the hillside facing the sea is the Devil's Den. Here, according to Indian legend, once lived a giant named Maushope, a benevolent tutelary deity who broiled whole whales over fires built with huge trees torn up by the roots. He kept the Gay Head Indians supplied with fish, and once even agreed, reluctantly, to build them a bridge across the sound to Cuttyhunk, five or six miles away – but only pledged one night's work, during the time between sundown and cockerow. The Cuttyhunkers wanted no part of this, but only one old woman among them knew how to thwart the project. An hour or two after dark she held a lighted candle before the eyes of her rooster, which let out a lusty cockadoodledo; whereupon Maushope, who had been tossing tremendous boulders outward from the shore to form a causeway, went home to bed. The line of rocks with which he fulfilled the letter of his contract is called the Devil's Bridge.¹⁵

Besides the Den at Gay Head, the Devil has two Dens on the Massachusetts mainland: one, a cave near Wilmington; the other, a rocky gorge with beautiful mossy walls and deep pools, right in the Northampton-Amherst area where Edwards fought him to a forensic standstill and Emily Dickinson reported,

The Only One I meet
Is God.

No, the old Devil who snatched away those five "pawwawing" Indians near Aquiday is not about to give up his possessions even though he may have to manage them only as an absentee landlord. Furthermore, the Americans who preserved so many hundreds of Indian names for the places from which they so ruthlessly expelled their Iroquois or Cherokee or Sioux or Apache inhabitants seem more than willing to let the Devil's name stand as long as they enjoy an easement to visit the property, including the right to scrawl their initials and chip off pieces as souvenirs.

It may be the merest token compensation, but perhaps it's the American way.

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¹⁵ B. A. Botkin, *Treasury of New England Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), p. 450.