The Street Name Systems of Pennsylvania before 1820

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THE DELINEATION AND CHARACTERIZATION of culture regions has been an area of long standing interest to American cultural geographers. Although numerous studies have been made utilizing a wide variety of indicators to delineate culture areas in this country, there still remains some question as to the actual location of the various sub-areas.[1] One aspect of the landscape that has not been examined is the street name pattern or complex. This initial survey of street names, using eighteenth and early nineteenth century Pennsylvania as a case study, has three basic purposes: 1) to determine if street names were randomly chosen, or if they were selected according to some standard street naming systems; 2) to determine if these systems, once they were established, were distributed in regionally significant patterns, and 3) to determine if these distributional patterns could be correlated with the distributions of previously studied elements of the material culture in order to strengthen further the conclusions of earlier research on culture areas in the eastern United States.

The study was initiated by an examination of maps and street plans of all towns extant in Pennsylvania in 1820 in order to ascertain the actual street names being utilized. The period before 1820 was chosen to keep this initial survey to a manageable size and in the belief that the cultural patterns would be more visible at

[1] Of the previous attempts at delineating culture areas in the eastern United States the most valuable have been Fred Kniffen, "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, LV (December, 1965), pp. 549–577; Hans Kurath, *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor, 1949); Wilbur Zelinsky, "An Approach to the Religious Geography of the United States: Patterns of Church Membership in 1952," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, LI (June, 1961), pp. 139–193; and Richard Pillsbury, "The Urban Street Patterns of Pennsylvania before 1815: A Study in Cultural Geography" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Geography, the Pennsylvania State University 1968).

this earlier date. Preliminary research[2] indicated that the street patterns of the various towns and villages had begun to become nationalized, that is, to exhibit national distributional patterns, sometime between 1820 and 1830, regardless of location. It was hoped that by examining only the earlier towns, that the regional trends would be more obvious.

When sufficient data was collected to demonstrate clearly that street name complexes did exist, the most frequently utilized names were listed and the incidence of these names was tabulated (see Table). A factor analysis was also run on the data which indicated that the street name complexes discussed below were both discrete and relatively significant. Finally, subsidiary research was conducted to verify the findings of the factor analysis, as well as to clarify the importance and origins of the more significant systems identified.

The Naming Complexes

Three major street naming complexes were recognized in this study: the Philadelphia, the Traditional English, and the Important Figure systems. Of these, the Philadelphia was the most numerous, although it did not reach its period of greatest importance until the late eighteenth century. The important Figure and Traditional English systems were both of about the same importance and achieved their greatest significance in the early half of the eighteenth century.

The Philadelphia Complex

The city of Philadelphia was laid out in 1682 by Thomas Holme under the direction of William Penn. Initially the city's streets were unnamed, although on his original plan of the city, Holme referred to several of the streets as follows:

> The City (as the Model shews) consists of a large Front-street to each River, and a High-street (near the middle) from Front (or River) to Front, of one hundred Foot broad, and a Broad-street in the middle of the City.[3]

Note, however, that when Holme referred to the "Broad-street" he meant a broad or wide street, and apparently did not intend the

[2] Pillsbury, *op. cit.*

[3] John Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, 1965), p. 161.

Table

Frequency of street names most commonly used in Pennsylvania before 1820

Philadelphia Names[1]		Traditional English	
Market	68	Main	57
Water	54	Church	42
Numbered[2]	54	Mill	21
2nd Number	48	Center	29
Direction[3]	47	Cherry	15
2nd Direction	19	State	13
Walnut	44	Maple	10
Front	37	Liberty	10
Chestnut	36	New	7
High	35	Gay	6
Pine	29	Cross	5
Vine	14	Court	3
Penn	14	Academy	7
Race	12		
Spruce	11		
Locust	11		
Mulberry	9	Other Names	
Alleghany	8		
Arch	6	Tree[5]	60
Diamond	5	Place-name	51
		Spring	11
Important Figure		Ferry	5
		Bridge	5
Public Figure	89		
Washington	28		
Personal Name[4]	22		
2nd Personal name	13		
King	13		
Queen	11		
Jefferson	6		

[1] Although the street names are arranged by their most common complex associations, most names also were occasionally utilized in more than a single grouping as an isolated anomaly. Some names of a given complex will appear more than others as most towns examined had too few streets to utilize all the names of any given complex.

[2] This refers to any numbered street; the next, to any other numbered street. No attempt was made to keep a listing on individual occurrences of the actual numbers themselves.

[3] This refers to any directional name, north, south, east or west.

[4] This refers to any personal name, Thomas, Richard and so on.

[5] This refers to any tree name which is not listed individually.

street to be named such. The same is also true of the two streets facing, or fronting, the rivers; again his designation, "Front-street," was meant not as a name, but as a description. Other than these initial designations, the streets of the city did not receive official or quasi-official names during the early years of settlement, and those names that did come into usage were informal. In general, these informal names were the names of prominent persons who lived along that street. For example, Wynee Street, later Chestnut, was named after Dr. Thomas Wynee who came to Philadelphia on the *Welcome* in 1682,[4] and Holme Street, later Arch, was named after the surveyor of the city, Thomas Holme.[5] Some streets were also named after local features, such as Pool Street, later Walnut, which was named after the pool or dock lying at its foot,[6] while Valley Street, later Vine, was named after a small vale or valley found along its length.[7]

When Penn returned from England on his second trip, he looked at the haphazard arrangement of names for the streets and decided that he should officially designate names for them. He was especially concerned in this matter, for, as a Quaker, he was opposed to the glorification of the individual in this fashion. He retained the original names for the streets that were informally taken from Holme's original plan and numbered those streets lying parallel to the Front Streets back toward the center of the peninsula separating the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers. Thus, in his new plan, there were two Second streets, two Third Streets and so on. There were no First Streets, however, as the first street in each case had already been designated as "Front Street." He then named the cross streets after "the things which spontaneously grow in the country."[8] The names he used initially were Cedar, Pine, Spruce, Walnut, Chestnut, High, Mulberry, Sassafras, and Vine.[9]

Penn's original designations for the streets of Philadelphia did not remain unchanged, however, and local custom prevailed over

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[4] Joseph F. Jackson, *Encyclopedia of Philadelphia* (Harrisburg, 1931), p. 421.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 1159.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 1159.

[8] George R. Stewart, *Names on the Land* (New York, 1945), p. 245.

[9] The names given here as being original, as well as their order, are based on the John Reed map of Philadelphia from 1774 in Reps, p. 161.

his wishes in several instances. High Street was locally referred to as "the Market Street" after the Market house which was located first at the corner of High and Front and later at High and Second Streets,[10] and the name was officially changed sometime during the eighteenth century. Mulberry was locally known as the "arch street" after the 66 foot masonry arch that was constructed over it to carry the uninterrupted traffic of Front Street. Although the arch was constructed in 1698 and torn down in 1721, the name Mulberry was not officially changed to Arch until the mid-nineteenth century.[11] Sassafras Street, which was initially known as Songhurst, after William Songhurst, was locally called the race or racing street, after the practice of the rich racing their horses along it from the river to Broad Street. In 1854 the name was officially changed to conform with the popular designation: it became Race Street.[12] Thus it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the cross streets finally attained the names officially by which we know them today.

The influence of the Philadelphia street name complex was not immediately felt throughout the state, however, and the more traditional English systems tended to flourish throughout the early eighteenth century. It was only with the increasing importance of urban speculation, after 1775, which was to an extent financed by Philadelphians, that this naming system began to achieve regional importance (Map 1). The shift to the Philadelphia name system at that time did not seem to result from any ground-swell of public opinion in favor of the system, but rather as a result of the problem of the Philadelphia-based speculators being forced to transmit simple directions by mail to the distant surveyors on the correct method of platting the proposed new town. Although some variations in the basic system did occur during this period, they were relatively insignificant. The Philadelphia name complex was utilized also in a number of already established towns. In several instances where the street names of older towns were named after the English aristocracy (see the Important Figure complex below), the offending names were altered, after the Revolution, to conform to the Philadelphia system.

[10] Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 874.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 1030.

Traditional English Complex

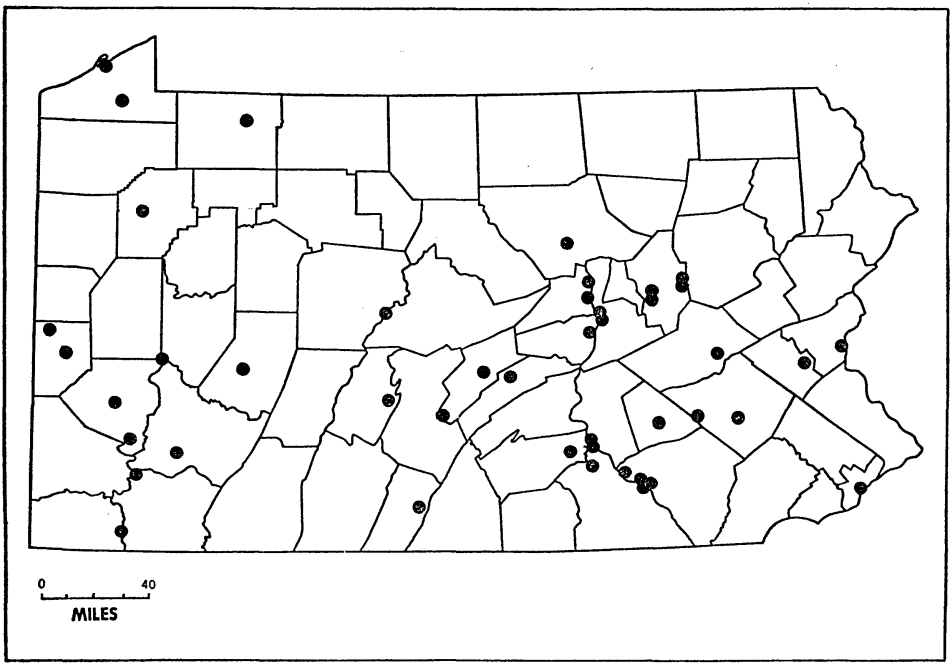
What may tentatively be called the Traditional English complex was the second most frequently used street name system in Pennsylvania during this period. The street names characteristic of this system are Church, Center, Broad, Mill, State, Cherry, Gay, Public, Cross, and Court. The name "Main" is also strongly associated with this system in Pennsylvania, and it is likely that the term, which today is such an integral part of our culture, may have been introduced to the United States through New England and carried with this street name complex. By the mid-nineteenth century the name "Main" was widely distributed throughout the country and many of the principal streets of smaller towns in Pennsylvania were changed from their original designations to "Main" at that time.

The origins of the Traditional English complex seemingly lie in England, and the incidence of the above-listed names in New England villages and other areas of strong English is quite high. George Stewart in *Names on the Land* attributes this system to both New England and Baltimore and makes no attempt to differentiate between this system and the Important Figure complex.[13] It is my belief, however, that the concept of naming a street after an individual, which, theoretically at least, was against Quaker principles, required a different type of cultural heritage than that mirrored in the Traditional English complex and I have distinguished them individually here. In Pennsylvania, towns utilizing this name complex are found most frequently along the northern border of the state, an area settled principally by emigrants from New England, and in a small zone roughly demarking the areas of strong English and Welsh influence in southeastern Pennsylvania (Map 2).

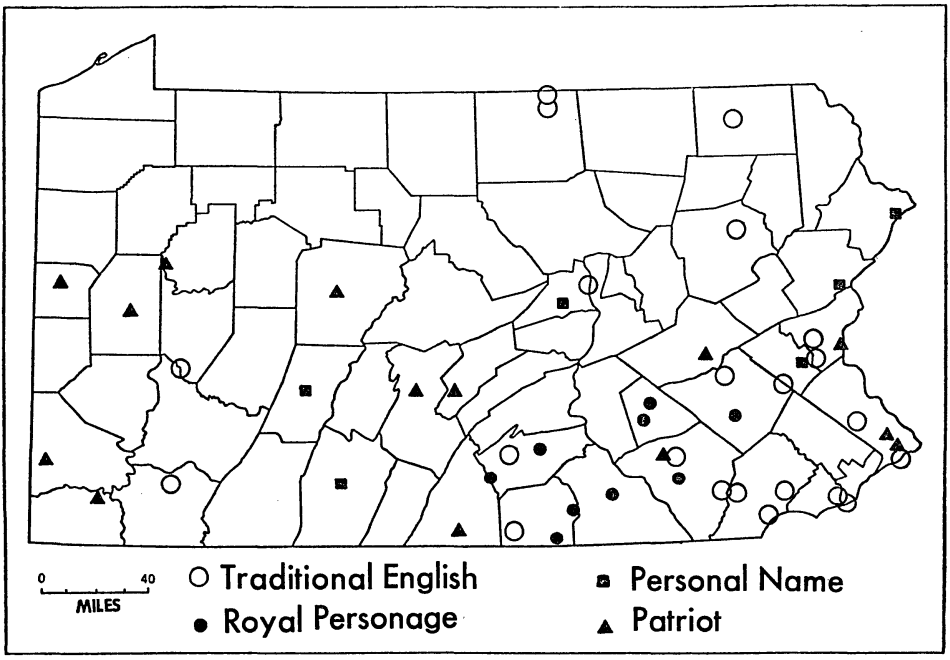
The Important Figure Complex

The Important Figure system is the most complex of all the naming patterns described here and its origins are very obscure. The system has several major sub-types, including the Personal Name type, the Royal Personage type, and the Patriot (or Important Figure) type. The first two of these are the oldest and both were utilized by the Proprietary and its associates for the early rectilinear towns in the colony, *e.g.*, Lancaster, Easton, Reading.

[13] Stewart, *op. cit.*, pp. 244–245.



Map 1. Towns utilizing Philadelphia street naming complex



Map 2. Towns utilizing Traditional English and Important Person street naming complexes

The Royal Personage sub-type seems to have the oldest roots in the colony and was widely used not only in Pennsylvania, but also in Tidewater Virginia and Maryland, as well as in eastern Canada. The most commonly used names in Virginia and Maryland of this sub-type were King and Queen for the principal cross streets, and lesser titles, such as Duke, Earl, Lord, Prince, and Princess, for the remainder. Family names of important individuals were also frequently used, for example Fairfax and Cameron Streets in Alexandria, Virginia;[14] Clemen and Callowhill Streets in Reading, Pennsylvania;[15] and Lowther and Pomfret Streets in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.[16]

The Personal Name type was used coincidentally with the Royal Personage type and often seemingly utilized the first or given names of the Penn family and their friends. Later adaptations of this sub-type utilized a wide variety of other personal or given names, including the names of various saints, friends and acquaintances of the town founders, and a variety of others which are unidentifiable today.

Finally, the third most significant sub-type was the Patriot (Important Figure) complex. In this naming system the names of the post-Revolutionary aristocracy were substituted in place of the English aristocracy. The most characteristic names of this sub-type in Pennsylvania were Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Penn, Fayette (Lafayette), and Greene. Other less frequently used public figures included the names of the governors of the state, local heroes, and almost anyone else that struck the town founder's fancy. In several instances this sub-type was utilized after the Revolution, as was the Philadelphia system, to alleviate the embarrassing problem of having a town's street names glorifying the then deposed English aristocracy.

Other Naming Complexes

Other naming complexes surely existed in the state. One lesser system that was recognized was the Route Designation complex, which was characterized by naming the main streets of a town after

[14] Reps, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

[15] Morton L. Montgomery, *History of Berks County in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1886), p. 652.

[16] Cumberland County Plan Book, 1A, pp. 66, 67.

the next important town along that particular street or road. In Gettysburg, for example, the street leading west was called Chambersburg, the street to the east, which was actually the same street, was called York, while the north-south street was called Carlisle.[17] Although this system is an obvious approach to the naming problem especially in the smaller crossroads villages, it did not receive a wide distribution. Early findings indicate that it may have been associated principally with Scotch-Irish settlement.

Conclusions

It would appear from the above discussion that discrete name complexes do indeed exist in Pennsylvania. It may also be concluded that the distribution of at least the Philadelphia complex roughly coincides with the distribution of previously described culture sub-areas in the state.[18] It may be used at least to some extent as an indicator of the influence of the Pennsylvania culture in various subsidiary areas. There is some question, however, about the importance of the distributions of the other naming patterns in their entirety. Although these distributions do roughly coincide with areas of high incidence of New England and Virginian cultural influences within Pennsylvania, these complexes also extend well beyond those areas generally credited as having been strongly influenced by those respective "alien" cultures. It would be naive to discredit these obvious anomalies with a few words, however, as the incidence of these naming complexes, beyond their traditional areas, clearly indicates that these elements were being diffused throughout the state well beyond the generally established limits of Virginian and New England cultures within the state. It would seem, therefore, that the cultural milieu of the state was far more complex than any earlier simplistic attempts to describe it would indicate. As such, there is still more work remaining in this area of research.

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[17] D. J. Lake, *Atlas of Adams County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1872), p. 63.
[18] Pillsbury, *op. cit.*