

National Gazetteers of the United States

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THE RECORDING OF PLACE-NAMES, those names applied to geographical entities, usually is done alphabetically in reference works most commonly known as gazetteers or geographical dictionaries. The gazetteer may be universal, national, or regional in its scope, and it may vary from the simple form of a mere findings list to one with expanded accounts giving considerable geographical information. Also it is timeless; that is, it never becomes really out-of-date, an often overlooked characteristic. In spite of the persistence of places and the generally great stability of place-names, many names do change, some completely, others only in their spelling, whereas some places may disappear altogether. As new gazetteers appear they are not likely to have cross-references to former or variant spellings, and space is not given to lost entities.

It has been more than three-quarters of a century since a national gazetteer of the United States, that is, one that is solely devoted to this country and which includes many kinds of geographical entities, has been published. Before examining the reason for this long delay, let us go back to the earliest possible recording in gazetteers of place-names in what are now our present boundaries and historically trace the gazetteers leading up to our first national gazetteer.

COLONIAL BACKGROUND

The first gazetteer to appear following the landfall of Columbus in the West Indies in 1492 was the 1493 edition of Zaccaria Lilio's *Orbis Breviarium*. Neither this edition nor three subsequent editions, however, the last appearing in 1551, contain a single entry pertaining to the New World. Abraham Ortelius in his gazetteers, *Synonymia* (1578) and *Thesaurus Geographicus* (1587) ignored the Western Hemisphere almost as completely as Lilio. With diligent search three references to the Americas can be found in each of these two works. The omissions are interesting since his map

Americae Sive Novi Orbis, Nova Descriptio which appears in his famous atlas *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* of 1570 contains several hundred place-names. Philippus Ferrarius matched Ortelius in ignoring the New World. His *Lexicon Geographicum* of 1627, the most celebrated of his works, contains but two entries pertaining to America, and they are in the index of the work and not in the main body. It was nearly a century and one-half following Columbus' arrival before due consideration was given to including American place-names in gazetteers. Pierre Duval, the nephew of Nicolas Sanson of Abbeville, was the first compiler of a geographical dictionary that dealt with the modern world; prior to his work emphasis was placed on ancient geography. His *ABC de tout le monde*, published in 1651, took cognizance of the Americas with a significant number of Western Hemisphere entries, and from that time on the New World was no longer ignored in works of the gazetteer type.

Dictionnaire universel de la France ancienne et moderne, et de la Nouvelle France, compiled by Claude Marin Saugrain, and published in Paris in 1725 in three volumes, is the first gazetteer important for the recording of place-names in the area of the present-day United States. In the third volume there is a section of 182 columns captioned *Nouvelle France, isles, et autres colonies françoises*. This section is now of considerable value for the information it provides concerning the Mississippi and the Ohio valley regions.

Not until 270 years after Columbus' discovery of America did a gazetteer appear that was devoted solely to the Western Hemisphere. It is a three volume work, published anonymously in London by A. Millar in 1762, titled *The American Gazetteer*. The compiler gives no credit for the sources of his work, the number of his articles are sparse, and they are uneven in quality and content. Under the letter *A*, for example, there are only 53 articles. Again for example, he devotes only one-quarter of a page to Peru but 24 pages to Quito (city and province), three pages each to Canada and Mexico but 18 to New England. For all of its limitations this gazetteer does have its value in that it brings together in one place geographical information on the Americas and contains more entries about America than can be found in any large universal gazetteer of that time. It was translated into the Italian and published in Livorno in 1763 under the title *Il gazettiere Americano*.

The next gazetteer devoted solely to the Americas was also published anonymously, again in London, by G. Robinson in 1776. It bears the title *North American and West Indian Gazetteer*. This work, having a more limited scope with respect to area than the *The American Gazetteer*, carries many more entries pertaining to its subject areas. Again the compiler gives no sources for his information other than the *West-India Atlas*.¹ Much of the introductory information is copied almost word for word from *The American Gazetteer* as are a great many of the entries.

A work of great merit, the five volume *Diccionario Geográfico-Histórico de las Indias Occidentales ó America*, compiled by Don Antonio de Alcedo y Bexarano, was published in Madrid during the period 1786-1789. The compiler of this dictionary was born in Quito in 1735, the son of Dionisio de Alcedo y Herrera, an historian of note and a man of influence with the Spanish court in Madrid. Although Antonio's youth was divided between the New and the Old World, most of it was spent in Quito. When he was 17, his family moved to Spain, at which time he entered the Spanish Royal Guards as a cadet. Thereafter his entire life was spent in the Spanish Army in which he eventually reached the rank of marshal.²

Onís says "Alcedo's claim to fame is based upon his *Diccionario* . . . a work destined to be for many years afterwards the best informed encyclopedia on Spanish-American matters. It was also to have the distinction of being the first work ever written by a Spanish American in which the newborn republic, the United States of America, was seriously studied. The part that deals with this subject is unusually accurate."³ In the preface to a translation of the *Diccionario* the translator, G. A. Thompson, has this to say about the original work:

It was mentioned in my Prospectus . . . that the original was published . . . by Colonel Don Antonio de Alcedo, a native of America, in five small quarto volumes, by a large subscription of the most respectable characters in the State, and that its merits were its only condemnation; for that the very true and accurate information it contained was looked upon with an eye of such jealousy by the Spanish Government, as to have caused its immediate suppression by the Supreme Power.⁴

¹ An atlas with this title by Thomas Jefferys was published in London in 1775.

² José de Onís, "Alcedo's Bibliotheca American," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 31, 1951, pp. 530-532.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 532.

(Footnote 4, see next page)

He further goes on to say that not many copies escaped, that probably not more than five or six existed in Great Britain, and that his attempts to procure any from the continent were unsuccessful.

Upon what authorities Alcedo based his work are not fully known. Since he makes reference to, although not as sources, "los Diccionarios de Moreri, Vosgien, y la Martiniere, y otros muchos"⁵ it seems quite likely that he did use them. Although he acknowledges use of the *American Gazetteer*, he considers his work superior to it. He advances his argument by comparing the number of articles in each of the two gazetteers under the letter *A*; in his, he says, there are more than 1,000, whereas in the *American Gazetteer* it does not exceed 100.⁶

THE NEW REPUBLIC

Up to this point we have been examining the background and making a survey of the gazetteer literature so far as it pertains to the area of the United States prior to the Declaration of Independence and during a very short span of years thereafter. From here on, that is from 1795 and after (with one exception), we shall confine our interest to the strictly national gazetteers of the United States. (The word national implies scope, not official authority.) The date 1795 is not chosen arbitrarily, for it was in that year that Joseph Scott brought out his *The United States Gazetteer*, printed by F. and R. Bailey of Philadelphia.

There is nothing very remarkable about Scott's work; its distinction lies in the fact that it was the first work of its kind to deal exclusively with the new republic. Of this fact Scott was proud, as can be seen from his statement, "When we reflect that no gazetteer has ever been published of the United States, I may with some degree of justice say, I have 'trodden an unbeaten path.'"⁷ Scott failed to give credit for any of the sources of his information. With

⁴ Antonio de Alcedo y Bexarano, *The Geographical and Historical Dictionary of America and the West Indies* (translated by G. A. Thompson; 5 vols; London, 1812-15), Vol. 1, p. viii. Thompson also added much new information to his translation. He included the *American Gazetteer*, by Jedidiah Morse, as one of his sources.

⁵ Alcedo, *Diccionario*, Vol. 1, p. vi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁷ Scott, *The United States Gazetteer*, p. vi.

respect to this failure we have Jedidiah Morse's complaint that "From this work [Morse's *The American Universal Geography*] Mr. Scott, Author of the *Gazetteer of the United States*, derived no small part of the information contained in his Book, though he has not been candid enough to acknowledge it in his preface."⁸

Practically nothing is known of Scott other than his publishings. He expanded his *United States Gazetteer*, bringing it out in 1805 under the title *A Geographical Dictionary; of the United States of America*, wrote several geographies, and compiled a four-volume universal geographical dictionary. As a cartographer and engraver he prepared the maps for his own works. We know neither when or where he was born or died nor what sort of a person he was.

Although not a national gazetteer, *The American Gazetteer* of Jedidiah Morse, published in 1797, is of sufficient importance to warrant our attention. In spite of the fact that it is regional in scope – it covers the entire western hemisphere – it is much more comprehensive than Scott's work of 1795 with respect to the United States, containing two to three times as many entries pertaining to our new nation. Another reason for giving consideration to Morse here is that not an inconsiderable part of the ground work for a national gazetteer is his *The American Universal Geography* of 1793.

An interesting footnote about the *American Gazetteer* is furnished us by Sealock and Seely:

The decision to compile and publish this was reached in 1786 while Morse was traveling for the purpose of collecting material for his American geography. The gazetteer was delayed by the work of revising the geography. Capt. Thomas Hutchins, Geographer General of the United States, had started a similar project, but upon learning of Morse's intention turned over to him all of his material. Morse said also, "After all it is but proper here to observe, that a very considerable part of the matter of this volume has been selected and alphabetically arranged, under the proper heads, from *The American Universal Geography*."⁹

Unlike Scott, Morse gave credit to the many sources he used in his compilation, not excluding Scott's *Gazetteer*, but to what extent he used the latter is not apparent.

⁸ Jedidiah Morse, *The American Gazetteer* (Boston, 1797), p. v.

⁹ Richard B. Sealock and Pauline A. Seely, *Bibliography of Place-Name Literature* (2nd ed.; Chicago, 1967), pp. 48–49.

Two more editions of Morse's gazetteer were published, one in 1798 and another in 1810. It also came out in an abridged form in 1798. Morse was the co-author, with his son Richard, of another gazetteer, national in scope this time, *The Traveller's Guide; or Pocket Gazetteer of the United States*. It appeared in two editions, the first in 1823, and then in an enlarged, revised, and corrected form in 1826.

Although a small work – it contains only 53 pages – the place-name literature of the United States is incomplete without including *The American Gazetteer; or Geographical Companion*, compiled by Charles Smith and printed by A. Menut of New York in 1797. This work, with the compilations of Scott and Morse, makes up the domestically produced gazetteer literature of eighteenth century United States.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

National gazetteers of the United States appeared infrequently during the first three decades of the nineteenth century – in fact but three titles, one of which was issued in two editions. Then came a publishing period of great activity – in the 22-year span from 1832 to 1854 a new title or a new edition appeared in every year save seven. It should be noted, however, that five of the seven unproductive years fell in the last half of this period, a time when the territorial expansion of the United States was enormous – almost all of our South West and all of our Far West, through the annexation of Texas, the recognition of our claim to the Oregon Country by Great Britain, the territory ceded by Mexico in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the Gadsden Purchase. That this placed an immense burden on the compilers of national gazetteers is to state the case mildly.

After Baldwin and Thomas published their 1364-page *A New and Complete Gazetteer of the United States*, in 1854, was it considered that the undertaking of such a task was no longer profitable? Each year for nearly 20 years thereafter the answer appeared to be more and more strongly in the affirmative. Then in 1873 another national gazetteer appeared. Did it earn its keep? We do not know. But another attempt was not made until 11 years later in 1884. Again we do not know whether this venture was profitable, but since no

national gazetteer has been issued since then, it quite definitely appears that the publishing of such a work has become no longer financially feasible.

The financial aspect has been raised with respect to the publishing of our national gazetteers because all were published privately and none by the government, where a profit motive would not be a consideration. Several conjectures could be set forth for failure of the federal government to publish a national gazetteer, such as a lack of interest, a failure to recognize a need, or lack of a money appropriation; but what the reason is I do not know.

During the nineteenth century national gazetteers of the United States were issued under 15 titles in about 36 editions or printings.¹⁰ Generally speaking they have much in common. Usually they have a lengthy article about the United States, describing it geographically and giving information about its population, manufacturing, commerce, government, and institutions. Articles of varying length are devoted to states, territories, and cities. Entries pertaining to physical features – mountains, valleys, rivers, streams, bays, and so forth are relatively scarce. The great bulk of the entries is made up of references to post offices, villages, towns and townships.

A perusal of these gazetteers, particularly of those issued before the pressure of entries reduced space allotments for information concerning the small town or village to little more than a line or two, is both interesting and enlightening. The information about these small populated places gives us some insight into the geographical setting and into the cultural and economic life of the United States of an earlier period, when it was largely made up of many small rural communities. One good example, from a very large number that might have been selected, will serve to illustrate:

ATTICA, post-township, Wyoming Co., N. Y., 257 [miles] west [of] Albany, 375 [miles from] Washington. The surface is rolling, and the soil, a fertile clay loam. It is watered by the Tonawanda Creek, and its tributaries. The village contains 1 Presbyterian and 1 Methodist church, a bank, a female seminary, 8 stores, 2 grist mills, 1 tannery, 1 clothiers' works, 100 dwellings, and 800 inhabitants. There are in the township 12 stores, capital \$ 45,000, 1 fulling mill, 1 woolen factory, 2 tanneries, 1 printing office, 1 weekly newspaper, 1 flouring mill, 2 grist mills, 4 saw mills, 1 oil mill. Capital in manufacturing \$ 33,950. 2 academies, 140 students, 13 schools, 725 scholars. Population 2,710.¹¹

(Footnote 10 and 11, see next page)

It is well known that the United States at mid-nineteenth century was rural, protestant, with many small communities more or less self-sufficient with numerous small stores and manufacturing facilities; and that its population was young and attended many small schools, few going beyond the grade school level. But in the example given, as in hundreds of others, we see the details that put flesh on the raw bones of generalization. Besides this, of course, if one is looking for information on a particular place there it is in the gazetteer, serving the purpose for which it was compiled.

As pointed out above, after mid-nineteenth century there were only two national gazetteers of the United States published. These two differed from their predecessors. The United States was developing and its population was growing, and this made for a very large increase in the possible number of entries for a gazetteer. This possibility became the actuality, but the increase in entries was accompanied by a decrease in the amount of information per entry. Where the earlier gazetteers gave at least a few, and sometimes many, lines to an entry the last two gazetteers reduced information to a minimum, hardly more than a single line in most instances. Of course there were still some entries of greater length, even to the point of being long. A comparison of the number of Farmington entries in Haskel and Smith's gazetteer of 1845 with the number in Steinwehr's of 1873¹² illustrates the point. In the former there are 16, whereas in the latter there are 42. Presumably 26 more Farmingtons, an increase of 162.5 percent., came into being in the interim. To continue the illustration let us look at the entry for Farmington Township, N. Y., in each of these two gazetteers. The entry in the one for 1845 reads:

FARMINGTON, p-t., Ontario co., N. Y., 205 w. Albany, 351 W. The surface is level; soil generally stiff clay, difficult of cultivation, but produc-

¹⁰ For a bibliography of United States gazetteers see Sealock and Seely *op. cit.* [footnote above], pp. 46-50. Not included in their bibliography are Charles Smith, *The American Gazetteer; or Geographical Companion* (New York, 1797) and *A Gazetteer Containing a General View of the United States and the Several States and Territories* (Akron, Ohio, 1843).

¹¹ Daniel Haskel and J. Calvin Smith, *A Complete Descriptive and Statistical Gazetteer of the United States of America* (New York, 1845), p. 42. For ease in reading and understanding I have spelled out most of the abbreviations.

¹² A. von Steinwehr, *The Centennial Gazetteer of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1873).

tive. Drained by Mud cr., which enters Canandaigua outlet, and affords water power. The Auburn and Rochester railroad passes through the s. w. corner of the t. Large tracts of water limestone are found here. It has 2 stores, cap. \$ 8,500; 1 fulling m., 1 woolen fac., 1 tannery, 1 flouring m., 1 grist m., 2 saw m. Cap. in manufac. \$ 69,427. 1 acad. 40 students, 16 sch. 740 scholars. Pop. 2,122.¹³

Twenty-eight years later, however, the entry has been reduced to this:

Farmington, tn. in Ontario co., N.Y. Pop., 1,896.¹⁴

The 1845 gazetteer of 752 pages contains about 16,000 entries as compared with the 1873 gazetteer of 1,016 pages with about 36,000 entries.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Whether there will ever be another national gazetteer of the United States is extremely doubtful, especially one that would be comprehensive with respect to names of natural features, populated places, and localities. An insight as to why this may be is given to us by the late Lewis Heck, who said that "while no precise estimate [of how many names could be listed in a comprehensive gazetteer of present day United States] is possible, it is believed that a complete name list for the continental United States would require not less than one million entries." He goes on to say that such a list with "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 paper used."¹⁵

More recent information as to the possible number of entries in a gazetteer strengthens the doubt about the appearance of a new publication. Donald J. Orth, Chief, Geographic Names Section, U. S. Geological Survey, has this to say:

The total number of geographic names in the United States has been a subject of my investigations for several years. Of course the number arrived at is dependent upon one's definition of a geographic name. My studies only included names of natural features, populated places, and localities; they did not include names commercial in nature such as those of airports, dams, shopping centers, and housing developments. I constantly arrive at an

¹³ Haskel and Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

¹⁴ Steinwehr, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

¹⁵ Lewis Heck, "The Problem of a National Gazetteer," *Names* 1:4 (December, 1953), 234-235.

average figure of 2.5 million names based on names that presently appear or would appear on Geological Survey maps at 1:24,000 scale if all of the country were so mapped. The figure also includes an extra five percent for historical or obsolete names, but does not include variant names for presently named features.¹⁶

Using Mr. Orth's estimate for the number of entries and Heck's estimate for the number of volumes required for one million entries we arrive at the figure of 15 to 20 volumes as the number necessary for a comprehensive gazetteer of present-day United States.

The possibility of a less comprehensive national gazetteer some time in the future is another matter. At the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held at Geneva, September 4-22, 1967, the Committee on National Standardization "recommended each [national] names authority produce, and continually revise, appropriate gazetteers of all its standardized geographical names."¹⁷ The first question then, is it necessary for the United States to standardize two and one-half million names? And next, how would it be done? It certainly cannot be done at the slow rate at which decisions are being reached now by the Board on Geographical Names in standardizing names. If a determination could be made of the minimum number of essential names that should be included in a national gazetteer, and if this number does not make the cost of publishing it prohibitive, and if an accelerated process of standardizing geographical names can be devised, then a national gazetteer as envisioned by the United Nations Conference might become a reality.

SUMMARY

The history of the national gazetteer of the United States finds its roots in the universal and regional gazetteers appearing during the period of Colonial America. Seven years after the ratification of the Constitution our first national gazetteer was published. The year was 1795. New gazetteers appeared infrequently until the 1830s, when a flourishing quarter of a century of publishing in this

¹⁶ Letter, dated July 30, 1968, from Donald J. Orth.

¹⁷ U. S. Delegation to the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Geneva, September 4-22, 1967, Report submitted to the Secretary of State (Washington, 1967), p. 35.

area began. Thereafter only two more appeared, the last being in 1884, or more than three-quarters of a century ago. These gazetteers are still useful not only as aids to location and identification of places but also, and more importantly, for the information they give us about an earlier America so different from America of today. That there will ever be another national gazetteer seems doubtful, at least one that is comprehensive in scope. One with a limited number of entries and reduced entry information appears as the only possibility.

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NECROLOGY

Professor Chas. L. Wrenn, member of the American Name Society and prominent old English scholar, died in Oxford, England, December, 1969.