

Seventeenth Century Generic Place-Names: Culture and Process on the Eastern Shore

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AN IMPORTANT ASPECT of the study of generic place-names is the relationship which exists between a particular culture and the names it assigns to features extant upon the landscape. This aspect of place-name study is clearly acknowledged in the geographic and place-name literature. Robert C. West has observed that, "Place names may be considered as significant in the cultural landscape as house types, field types, field patterns, and modes of transportation."¹ Wilbur Zelinsky has further noted that, "As major items on any cultural landscape, [generic] terms deserve close scrutiny for their own sake; but even of greater importance are the complex, uncharted interrelationships among place names and other phases of culture and the possibility that their study may illuminate significant aspects of American cultural history and geography."² It is unfortunate that, with the notable exception of E. Joan Wilson Miller's paper on "Naming of the Land of the Arkansas Ozarks," little definitive research has been published on this subject.³

This paper summarizes the results of a rather lengthy study which sought to identify the various cultural processes involved in the rendering of names to a particular landscape. In this study, the name "Eastern Shore" is used to designate all of the peninsula east of the Chesapeake Bay (presently comprising parts of Maryland, Virginia, and including all of the state of Delaware).⁴ The following toponymic questions were analyzed as they applied to the Eastern Shore during the first hundred years of English naming: (1) what kind of features are named in a landscape?, (2) what cultural processes are involved in placing names on the landscape?, and (3) what cultural values are reflected in a place-name?

¹ Robert C. West, "The Term 'Bayou' in the United States: A Study in the Geography of Place Names," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 44 (1954), p. 63.

² Wilbur Zelinsky, "Some Problems in the Distribution of Generic Terms in the Place Names of the Northeastern United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 45 (1955), p. 319.

³ E. Joan Wilson Miller, "The Naming of the Land in the Arkansas Ozarks: A Study in Culture Process," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 59 (1969), pp. 240-251.

⁴ Janet H. Bigbee, *17th Century Place Names: Culture and Process on the Eastern Shore* (Unpublished Master's thesis, Department of Geography, University of Maryland, College Park, 1970).

METHODOLOGICAL BASIS

The three methodological premises upon which the research is based are as follow: (1) generic terms have a specific function as part of place-names, (2) the antecedents of generic place-names are found in the general geographic vocabulary of the naming group, and (3) generic names may be considered to be elements of language to which, therefore, a number of linguistic concepts and theories are applicable.

The first aspect of place-names to be considered is their precise function as generic names. The "specific" element in a place-name has an obvious function: it distinguishes a feature from all other similar features as, for example, "Red Cap" in *Red Cap Creek* designates a particular creek. Less obvious is the function of the generic name. The generic name conveys certain information concerning the nature of the feature named.

A generic-place name may serve merely to place a feature of the landscape in some general category such as relief or drainage, or it may express rather distinct physical and/or cultural qualities of the particular feature. For example, on the Eastern Shore, the term *meadow* denoted not only a low, wet, and generally treeless area, but one in which the grasses could be cut for hay. In order to fulfill these functions, the meaning of a term must be easily comprehended by both the namer and his culture group. A second requisite holds that a generic name must also be a word common to the general vocabulary of the culture in question prior to its use as an element in the naming of a place. Evidence for this premise is readily available. For instance, the term *gut* is used frequently in early general descriptive references to streams and estuaries affected by tidal action. *Gut* does not appear during the seventeenth century, however, as part of a particular place-name on the Eastern Shore. By the twentieth century, *gut* does appear on maps as the third most frequently occurring term for the area's tidal streams. It is clear, therefore, that an analysis of the generic names of an area necessitates a certain knowledge of language usage. The third premise is that generic names may be considered to be elements of language and a number of language concepts can therefore be applied to their study. The first of these linguistic characteristics to consider is the relationship which exists between language and the natural landscape.

The natural landscape may be interpreted as a continuous gradation of conditions. Such features as relief, drainage, and vegetation constitute environmental variables which, when perceived by man, are conveyed through the speech process as a series of discrete categories, that is, as words.⁵ Because nature seldom presents clear cut divisions of earthbound

⁵ Benjamin Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1956), pp. 240-291.

phenomena, such splits are culturally perceived, often arbitrary, and expressed or designated verbally. Conklin's now classic work in Hanunoo color categories, as well as a number of subsequent studies, has advanced substantial evidence to the effect that each social system organizes the world in accordance with its particular structure and requirements.⁶ It has been further observed that in any culturally defined category, the number of words used and their discriminatory value (that is, the precise and concrete distinctions between words in a category) are determined by the requirements of the culture for information about a particular phenomenon.⁷ These concepts would appear to hold also for terminology dealing with the physical landscape.

A second characteristic of language is the hierarchical arrangement of words in a vocabulary. A specific landscape feature may be properly identified by any number of words. Each of the terms, however, would tend to convey a varying amount of information concerning its specific characteristics. A comparison of the terms *hill* and *ridge* serves to illustrate this point. *Hill* refers to a natural elevation of the earth's surface rising more or less steeply above the level of the surrounding land. *Ridge*, on the other hand, designates a long narrow upland with steep sides, denoting not only relief, but something of the slope of the elevated land.

One may visualize a classificatory scheme of geographic terms in which each is placed in a hierarchical position. The position of these terms in the hierarchy reflects their discriminatory capabilities. The levels would progress from the general, such as *hill*, to the more specific terms, such as *ridge*.

A third characteristic to be considered is the existence in a particular field of knowledge of more than one vocabulary of terminology. Individuals of the same language and/or culture group do not necessarily have knowledge of all words common to their geographic vocabulary. Inclusion of a word or group of words in a personal vocabulary depends largely on the degree of contact and involvement with a particular condition of landscape.⁸

The fourth and last consideration is the relationship which exists between language and cultural dynamics. Words, as cultural expressions, are subject to change. For example, the English colonists landing in the New World found a landscape which was different in many respects from that of England. The necessity for words to express these new conditions resulted in the introduction of new terms. Such terms were obtained by

⁶ Harold C. Conklin, "Hanunoo Color Categories," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 2 (1955), pp. 339-44

⁷ Charles O. Frake, "The Diagnosis of Disease among the Subanum of Mindanao," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 63 (1961), p. 121.

⁸ David Lowenthal, "Geography, Experience and Imagination Toward an Epistemology," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 51 (1961), p. 260.

several means: (1) borrowing from other cultures (e.g., the Dutch), (2) extending the meanings of certain old topographic terms, (3) limiting the meanings of their old topographic terms, and (4) creating new terms out of old word material not previously used in a geographic sense.

The retention of terms has depended upon the continuing need to make evaluations or judgments of the features of the landscape.⁹ Thus, this word material was, and is, constantly being created and continually passing out of active use. It is preserved only as elements of place-names and in the literature of the period. Generic place-names may then represent the surviving remnants of geographic vocabularies of the past.

FEATURES NAMED ON THE EASTERN SHORE

The naming of the Eastern Shore during the seventeenth century took place in two distinct phases. In phase one (1526–1620), European contact with the peninsula was limited. The only visitors to the Eastern Shore during this period were a few explorers and members of occasional small expeditions from Virginia's Jamestown settlement. Hence, few features received name designations. Those which were named were features that lent general character to the landscape, such things as dominant types of vegetation, prominent relief, and general configuration.

Woods, for instance, was the term used to describe the general vegetation cover of the Eastern Shore. John Smith, in a description of the peninsula, noted, "...the land beyond [the Smith Islands] is covered by woods as is the rest of the country."¹⁰ During the course of early exploratory ventures, prominent relief features, particularly those visible from the coast, were given designations. The terms *hill* and *mountain* were assigned to such features. John Smith, for example, applied the term *mountain* to several relief features on the peninsula. He observed, "The highest mountains we saw Northward we called Peregrins Mount. . . ."¹¹ Both the indentations and projections of the coastline were included in the naming of the peninsula's general configuration. The indentations of the coast received such designations as *bays*, *inlets*, *creeks*, and *rivers*,¹² whereas the projections were designated as *capes*, *points*, and *isles*.¹³

⁹ George D. McJimsey, "Topographic Terms in Virginia," *American Speech*, Vol. 15 (1938), pp. 16–20.

¹⁰ Captain John Smith. *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*. (The Third Book, 1624), p. 413.

¹¹ *Ibid.* The exact location of Peregrins Mount is not known. No elevation on the peninsula exceeds 305 ft. Thus, Smith's "mountains" do not appear to be elevations of great height. In view of the usage of the term in other parts of colonial America and Great Britain, a mountain designation on the Eastern Shore was an anomaly. Smith also used the term *hill* in conjunction with the region's terrain: "The highest land on the mayne, yet it was but low, we called Keales Hill" (Smith, *loc. cit.*).

During phase II (1620–1700), a fairly extensive amount of European settlement was in evidence on the Eastern Shore. Actual settling of the land required the introduction of new descriptive terminology and place-names. The majority of these terms referred to the diverse types of land use and the complex drainage network of the peninsula. Common terms for the types and uses of land included *cleared ground*, *corn field*, *old field*, *pasture*, and *feeding woods*.¹⁴ Wetland terms included *swamp*, *meadow*, *marsh*, *savanna*, and *pocosin*.¹⁵ *River*, *creek*, *branch*, and *run* were used in reference to streams.¹⁶

¹² Bays and inlets appear to have been similar features, differentiated principally by the size of their closures. *Bays* were designated and defined as wide closures facing the open sea, whereas those with narrow closures were termed *inlets*. Various references to *creeks* are also made in the descriptive narratives of Eastern Shore explorers. John Smith, for example, noted, "His Country is a pleasant fertile clay soyle, some small creekes, good Harbours for small Barks, but not for Ships" (Smith, *loc. cit.*). In this statement, *creek* appears to be synonymous with *inlet*. *Creek*, used in this context, was in accord with the standard sixteenth and seventeenth century English usage, denoting a narrow recess or inlet in the coastline which offered facilities for anchoring and unloading small ships (O.E.D.). Evidently Smith, as well as a number of subsequent travelers along the coast, misconstrued the nature of the creeks on the Eastern Shore: in passing the broad mouths of these streams, they mistook them to be inlets or creeks (in the English sense). Later, it was learned that these were in fact streams of some length. Nevertheless, the original designation of creek was often retained. The most prominent indentations along the coast were the broad mouths of large tidal streams; these were called *rivers* by the early English explorers.

¹³ Capes and points were similar features, differentiated principally on the basis of their size. *Cape* was the term used for the larger of the two projections. The word appears only in association with the two prominent headlands, Cape Charles and Cape Henlopen. Points resembled capes in shape, but not in size. This usage suggests that at least a two step size hierarchy existed in the terminology for coastal projections. There was, however, a third term in this category of terminology. The English explorers classified the *isles* or *islands* adjacent to the mainland as projections of the coastline. Smith, for instance, wrote, "From Wighcocomoc to this place, all the coast is low broken Isles of Morass (marsh)" (Smith, *loc. cit.*). The inclusion of *isles* in this category is very similar to its usage in certain twentieth century legal definitions. One such definition states that the coast is, properly, not the sea, but the land which bounds the sea; it is the limit of the land jurisdiction, and of the parishes and manors (bordering the sea) which are part of the land of the country [from *A Glossary of Geographical Terms*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1961)].

¹⁴ The use of these terms coincided with the transformation of the Eastern Shore landscape from woodland to cultivated land, and eventually to abandoned fields and secondary growth forest cover which was used for the grazing of livestock. This sequence also represented a progression in levels of differentiation from the general to the specific. It should be noted that not one of this group of terms ever functioned as a generic place-name. Perhaps the explanation lies in the rather temporary nature of the described features.

¹⁵ The terms *swamp*, *meadow*, and *marsh*, represented distinct types of wetlands, differentiated by vegetation and judged cultural value. Swamps, for example, contained woody vegetation, whereas various types of grasses predominated in the marshes and meadows. Meadows and marshes differed in their economic usefulness. Meadows were useful for the growing of tobacco, corn, and natural hay, and were also ideal grazing lands;

The cultural appraisal of environmental conditions, as perceived during the two phases of European contact which have been described, led to the compilation of a geographic place-name vocabulary which has reflected significantly upon fundamental aspects of the cultural history of the Eastern Shore in the seventeenth century. On the next page is a taxonomy of the descriptive vocabulary and place-names on the peninsula from 1526–1700. The capitalized items in the taxonomy are words actually employed in place-names of the period. Many of these terms appeared in the seventeenth century as descriptive terminology and only in later centuries were they incorporated as parts of names. This terminology included:

<i>Indentations</i>	<i>High ground</i>	<i>Streams</i>
Inlet	Island (in a	Gut
Harbor	marshland or	Prong
Channel	hammock)	Glade
		Fork
<i>Projections</i>		<i>Wetlands</i>
Peninsula		Meadow

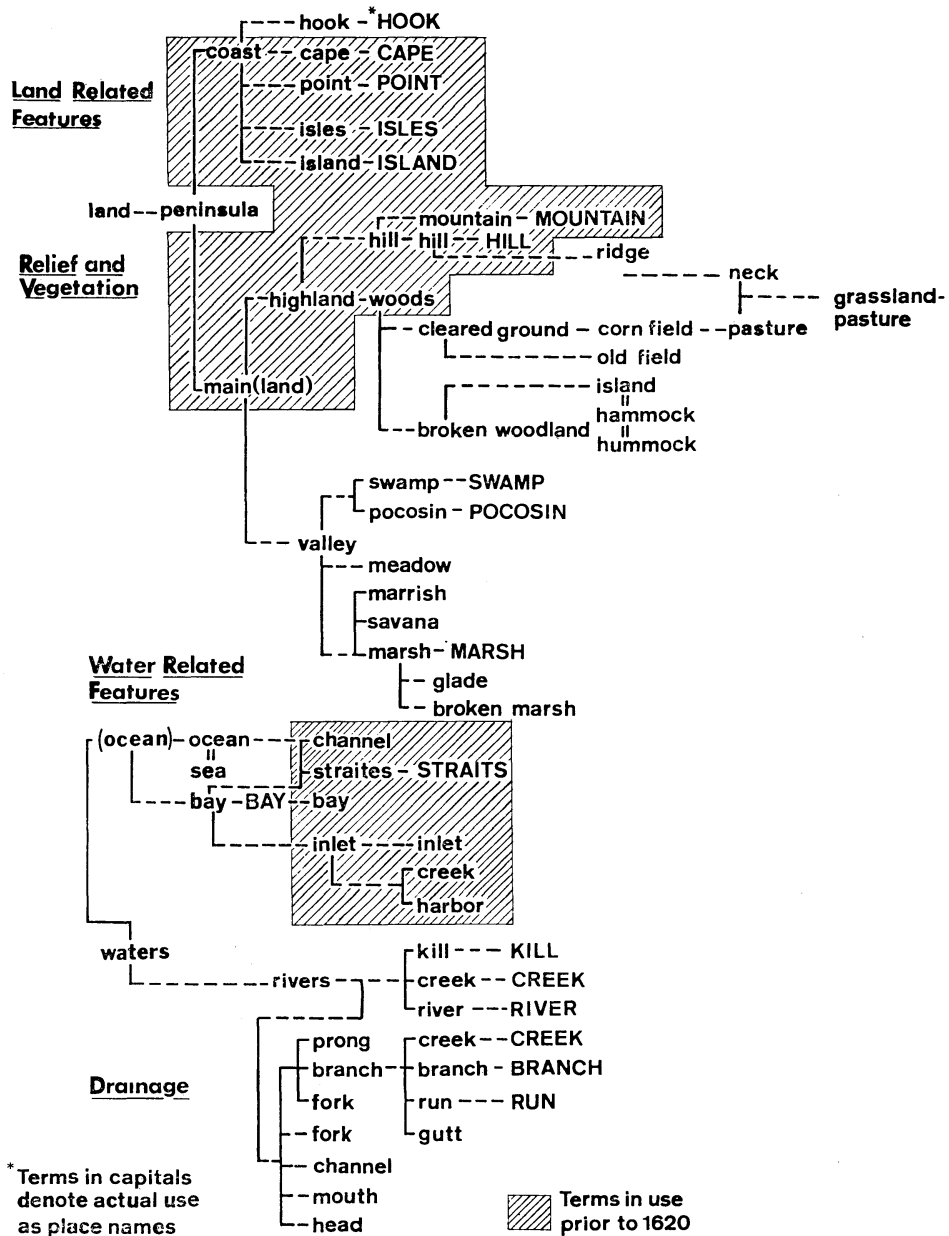
Conversely, some terms (i.e., *pocosin* and *forest*) appeared as place-name generics in the seventeenth century, but not in the twentieth century. Not all topographic terms became generic place-names, however. For instance, there is no record of the following terms ever having been used as part of any Eastern Shore place-name:

<i>Vegetation</i>	<i>Land uses</i>
Woods	Cleared ground
Broken woodlands	Corn field
	Old field
<i>Wetlands</i>	Pasture
Savana	Grassland pasture
Sunken marsh	Feeding woods
Broken marsh	
Salt marsh	

marshes, on the other hand, were too wet for the raising of crops and were poor pasture lands due to the low nutrient content of their native grasses.

¹⁶ The earliest concern in naming waterways on the Eastern Shore was directed toward their navigational qualities. For example, the term *river* was applied to the largest watercourses, which admitted large ships in their lower courses and smaller vessels (e.g., barks and sloops) much farther. The term *creek* denoted a smaller stream, which generally allowed only medium and small draft vessels (e.g., pinks and shallops). The terms *branch* and *run* were applied to small tributary streams, navigable only by shallow draft tobacco flats, canoes, and small barges. These streams were categorized according to depth, width, and length. The resultant stream hierarchy reflected the namers' recognition of a natural stream order. The orders of magnitude were clearly designated in the terminology applied to the drainage network.

THE TAXONOMY OF TOPOGRAPHIC TERMS ON THE 17TH CENTURY EASTERN SHORE



The terms on p. 237 referred either to a vegetation form, an aspect of land use, or a type of land. These features presumably did not receive distinctive names, either because of their indefinite extent, or their temporary nature.

CULTURAL VALUES REFLECTED IN PLACE-NAMES

The selection of those features to be described and named on the landscape of the Eastern Shore was determined by the requirements of the colonial culture for information about a particular landscape phenomenon. For instance, in phase I of the naming sequence, a number of coastal features received designations. These features were identified and named because of their importance as aids to navigation. Navigational instruments were notably poor in this early period; hence, navigators relied heavily on prominent coastal features to ascertain their position.

During phase II, various types and uses of land, as well as many of the peninsula's drainage features were identified. The naming of these features reflected the interests of the planting and stockraising culture on the Eastern Shore at this time. These named or described features had either positive or negative cultural values. Those features judged to have positive values included: (1) agriculturally productive land – *cleared ground*, *corn field*, *hammock*, *hummock*, and *island*; (2) sources of pasturage – *pasture*, *grassland pasture*, *feeding woods*, *meadow*, and *island* (the islands being barrier beaches); and (3) navigable water courses – *river*, and *creek*. Features with negative value included: (1) indigenous vegetation – *woods*; (2) unproductive land – *marsh*, *swamp*, *glade*, *pocosin*, *savana*, and *old field*; and (3) obstacles to overland travel – wetlands, and various types of watercourses.

CULTURAL PROCESSES INVOLVED IN THE RENDITION OF PLACE-NAMES

A variety of cultural processes were in operation during the two distinct phases of naming on the Eastern Shore. These processes included:

(1) *The evolution of geographic terminology from descriptive terms to place-name generics.* The transition of the term *branch* aptly illustrates this evolutionary process. In the first decade of settlement, *branch* merely denoted a tributary of a stream or the extension of a bay or swamp. Settlement at this time was still chiefly distributed along the navigable creeks and rivers. Thus, little interest was taken in naming the small tributary streams (i.e., branches). However, with an increase in population, new tracts were taken further inland and old tracts were subdivided.

Tributary streams were often employed as boundary lines for the new tracts. With this significance, the previously unnamed branches received specific name designations.

(2) *The categorization of landscape features.* Such terms as *marsh*, *meadow*, and *swamp*, for example, designate various classes of wetland on the Eastern Shore. These three terms, in sequence, represent a classification of wetland similar to a botanist's transect of coastal vegetation. This terminology, in effect, made many of the important botanical distinctions in the vegetation pattern more apparent. These linguistic divisions, however, were made more on the basis of appearance and of the perceived value of the land to the culture, than on a scientific foundation.

(3) *The arrangement of geographic terminology in hierarchies.* Stream terms, for instance, appear to have been assigned on the basis of depth, width, and length of the water courses. Thus, the names *river*, *creek*, *run*, and *branch*, are indicative of the concern for navigational properties of Eastern Shore waterways during the seventeenth century.

(4) *The introduction of new terminology in response to new environmental conditions and/or changing cultural requirements.* The terms *woods*, *cleared ground*, *corn field*, *old field*, *pasture*, and *feeding wood*, applied to stages in the agricultural cycle. The order and time of appearance of these terms paralleled the developments in the peninsula's agriculture during the seventeenth century.

CONCLUSION

The English colonist, landing in the New World, was confronted with a virtually nameless landscape. The nature of initial contact with the new environment necessitated the designation of only the most prominent landscape features or forms. Permanent settlement, however, gave rise to a much more direct involvement with the landscape. The naming of many additional features reflected the economic and social interests of the colonial culture. As long as tobacco planting and stockraising constituted the dominant forms of economic involvement, those elements of the landscape which were important to these land use patterns were identified and named.

Retention of the generics in the vocabulary depends upon the continuing need to make evaluations of landscape features. The often peculiar and meaningless generic place-names in use today, on the Eastern Shore and elsewhere, are, in fact, relics of a past culture.