

# Stress and Spelling in Certain Two-Element Place-Names in the U. S.

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**I**N THE LARGE NUMBER OF U.S. CITY, COUNTY, and state names consisting of two elements brought together syntactically for the occasion,<sup>1</sup> the convention of indicating stress by spelling is observed so consistently that exceptions become curiosities. Ordinarily in a name spelled as two words, the two are found to be stressed equally, e. g., *Sioux Falls* (S. D.), or if the first word is *new* and the second a borrowed proper place-name, the *new* normally receives a lighter stress than the second word, e. g., *New Jersey*. In contrast, in a two-element name spelled as one word, the second element is found to receive only a secondary stress, e. g., *Pottstown* (Pa.), or none at all, e. g., *Danville* (Va.).<sup>2</sup> Presumably stress determined spelling when the names were coined or given their present spellings; certainly readers infer stress from spelling according to these principles.

What, then, determines stress? As a rule, a second element in the name of a political subdivision (city, state, or county) is fully stressed and spelled as a separate word only when it is not a generic term for the kind of place being named: *Council Bluffs* (Iowa) is the name of a city and *Rhode Island* that of a state. Most such names are, like these two, simply the unmodified names of prominent local topographical features, e. g., *Pilot Mountain* (N. C.), *White Plains* (N. Y.), *Little River* (S. C.), *Niagara Falls* (N. Y.), and *Seven Pines* (Va.); some are the names of local travel points, e. g., *Great Bridge* (Va.), *Rocky Ford* (N. C.), *Harper's Ferry* (W. Va.), *May's Landing* (N. J.), *Sag Harbor* (N. Y.), and *Boswell's Tavern* (Va.); some, of local commercial enterprises, e. g., *Clifton Forge* (Va.); and some, of local institutions, e. g., *Falls Church* (Va.), *Guilford College* (N. C.), and *Washington Courthouse* (Ohio).

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<sup>1</sup> In one class such a name is composed of a proper noun—the name of a person, a family, an Indian tribe, or a historical event—plus a common noun, usually of geographical reference; occasionally the first element is itself a geographical noun, as in *Riverton* (Wyo.) and *Rapid City* (Iowa), and occasionally it is an adjective, as in *Warm Springs* (Ga.). In a second class the name consists of a specifying adjective plus a proper place-name either borrowed, as in *New Kent* (County, Va.), or shared, as in *South Carolina*.

<sup>2</sup> Broadcasters like to give *-ville* a secondary stress everywhere, making the vowel distinct, but colloquially the tendency is to give it no stress after a stressed syllable, representing the vowel by a syllabic *l*. Accordingly the town of Annville, Pa., finds an anvil a suitable emblem for itself.

When the second element is a word denoting the kind of place being named, it usually receives no more than a secondary stress and is therefore written as a suffix, e. g., *Pittsburg* (Pa.), *Greensboro* (N. C.), *Waterbury* (Conn.), *Annapolis* (Md.), *Shreveport* (La.), *Charleston* (S. C., etc.) *Hummelstown* (Pa.), *Jacksonville* (Fla.), and *Maryland*. The term *port* apparently carries a stronger suggestion of town than *landing* and *harbor* do, since it is spelled as a separate word only when it distinguishes the name of the port from that of the neighboring town farther inland, as in *Harwich Port* (Mass.). *Haven* also is usually a suffix with only secondary stress, e. g., *Belhaven* (N. C.) and *Lynnhaven* (Va.); it is quite properly a separate word in *Winter Haven* (Fla.), the metaphoric name of an inland town.

Certain terms, however, do not accommodate themselves to these patterns. *City* and *village*, though denoting the kinds of places in whose names they are used, are always stressed and never written as suffixes. Only in instances where *city* is useful in distinguishing the name of the municipality from that of the state, e. g., *Kansas City*, is the stress understandable. The lack of a European precedent for using *city* and *village* in names is worth considering as an explanation. *Dale*, which means a valley and according to the pattern should be stressed and spelled as a second word, is almost invariably spelled as a suffix and given only secondary stress, e. g., *Glendale* (Cal.); but note *Shermans Dale* (Pa). *Ford* as a second element is unstressed and spelled as a suffix in the English fashion when the first element is the name of the river, e. g., *Rockford* (Ill.), but not when the first element is a personal name or a descriptive adjective, e. g., *Mullins Ford* (Ga.) and *Rocky Ford* (N. C.).<sup>3</sup>

Certain individual names also refuse to fit the pattern in one way or another. *Scottsbluff* (Neb.) and *Marblehead* (Mass.) are locally pronounced with equal stress on the two elements, as befits names of their class, but they are spelled as if their second elements were not fully stressed. In the case of *Scottsbluff*, at least, it seems likely that the one-word spelling is an attempt to distinguish the name of the city from that of the nearby butte, *Scott's Bluff*.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, *Little*

<sup>3</sup> The many two-element English names which have been imported whole without a thought to their topographical significance, e. g., *Oxford*, *Hartford*, *Bradford*, and *Cambridge*, are not a concern of this paper. Likewise the ubiquitous *Beaverdam* was already established as a compound before being applied to the communities now answering to it; contrast *Davis Dam* (Nev.).

<sup>4</sup> The towns of Bigspring and Rockbluff, Neb., are similarly distinguished from the natural features whose names they bear. The entry "Scottsbluff: city, Scotts Bluff county Nebr. (Not Scotts Bluff.)" appears in the *Sixth Report of the United States Geographical Board 1890 to 1932* (Washington, 1933), p. 677. This board before its demise in 1934 arbitrated disputes concerning the spelling of such names as were submitted to it by local authorities. It based its decisions not on linguistic grounds but on such principles as a preference for "that spelling and pronunciation which is [sic] sanctioned by local usage" and for combining the words of any name consisting of more than one word (*Sixth Report*, p. 19); thus it approved *Scottsbluff* but rejected *Bigstone* in favor of *Big Stone* as the name of a county, a township, and a lake in South Dakota and of a county in Minnesota (*ibid.*, p. 143). Such a spelling as *Scottsbluff* may have practical advantages, but it is as jolting to a linguist as *Niagara Falls* would be.

*Rock* (Ark.) is spelled properly, but *Rock* is pronounced with only secondary stress, as if it were a suffix meaning town. Likewise *New Bern* (N. C.) is locally pronounced with a heavy stress on *New* and none whatever on *Bern*. Perhaps the need to distinguish was at work in these names also: Little Rock is named for “a rock which was smaller than one farther up stream,”<sup>5</sup> and *New Bern* was named by its original settlers for their mother city in Switzerland, so that heavy stress on *Little* and *New* at first would be likely; however, its persistence contrary to the custom in analogous names is puzzling.

This explanation of the pronunciation of *New Bern* raises another question: what prevented all the other names with *new* from behaving likewise? I suspect that when names like *New Bedford*, *New London*, and *New Britain* were first being used it was practical, perhaps necessary, to emphasize the first element, but that eventually the multitude of such names made it necessary to distinguish them from one another by stressing the second elements more heavily. *New Bern* escaped this process perhaps by being in a part of the country where there are very few names with *new*.

Another anomaly, *New Haven* (Conn.), is spelled and pronounced as if the city were named for an older city of Haven, but in fact it is named for the English city of Newhaven. Retention of the one-word spelling would have been not only more courteous, but also more in keeping with custom regarding *haven*. The closest analogy is with *Newport* (R. I., N. C., etc.), but apparently the seeming analogy with the many *new* names in the vicinity of New Haven was too strong to resist.

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<sup>5</sup> George R. Stewart, *American Place Names: a Concise and Selected Dictionary for the Continental United States of America* (New York, 1970), p. 260.