An Overview of Ohio Place Names

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Of all the midwestern states, Ohio was among those to be encountered first by westward-trending settlers, and, next to the present West Virginia, by those who came from the middle Atlantic piedmont and the seaboard. Thus it seems inevitable that Ohio geographical names should display the cultural characteristics of a wide range of national backgrounds of a population that was, in the main, racially homogeneous but culturally diverse. Three main streams of English background invaded the Indians' realm—those from New England (especially Connecticut), those from western Pennsylvania, and the southerners from Virginia. Add to these some nineteenth-century enclaves of migrants from Germany, Finland, Wales, France, and Ireland, as well as some blacks from our own southern states, and the diversity of Ohio's town and stream nomenclature is understandable. The study of the names involved in this paper is based almost entirely on map sources, confirmed by printed material and personal inquiry insofar as possible.

The departure of the Indian tribes for more promising lands farther west or north meant, as well, the abandonment of most of their names for their settlements and the landforms familiar to them. If the Indian name was not entirely lost, it often was badly mangled in pronunciation and shortened in spelling. Today the principal place name relics of the native culture are the names of Ohio's major waterways—the Mahoning, Cuyahoga, Walhonding, Miami, Sandusky, Tuscarawas, Maumee, Scioto, and Ohio rivers. About a fifth of Ohio's county names are Indian in origin, and in their current form they represent abbreviations and corruptions of Indian originals. In general, Indian names have not been transferred to population centers, though exceptions are apparent: Ashtabula, Wapakoneta, Huron, Cuyahoga Falls, and Coshocton, to list a few. The largest cities, however, bear family names: Youngstown, Columbus, Warren, Dayton, Fremont—or transfer names of widely-known cities: Toledo, Canton—or names from history: Cincinnati, Marietta, Steubenville. One major city, Akron, owes its name to its commanding position on the river divide separating the basins of the Cuyahoga and Tuscarawas-Muskingum drainage.

Ohio's natural landscapes, varied as they are, provide few outstanding natural features, but the map of the state is plastered with names of small streams or hills that would not be considered worthy of naming in Colorado or Idaho. Northern Ohio was profoundly affected by glacial deposition and scouring, leaving hundreds of lakes, ponds, and swamps. The more rugged part of the state is found in the Allegheny Plateau section of the eastern half; in the west glacial plains have been spread widely to soften an otherwise rolling landscape. Stream dissection of the plateau accounts for large numbers of small creeks, each with its own name, even though some are hardly more than a trickle of water. Naming these streams has involved the use of some generic terms that are distinctively southern in origin, and thus it is possible to determine the approximate northern limit of settlement by Virginians, as it appeared in an issue of NAMES several years ago.[1]

As already noted, the major streams bear Indian names, but the numerous tributary streams in this humid climate provide a strong impression of the surroundings experienced by the early-day settler. For these smaller streams, the first settlers tended to use descriptive terms, with emphasis on native tree growth, local mineral supplies, amount or character of the water supply, and the like. For local streams the most common names in order of usage are Little, Mile, Turkey, Camp, Lick (salt), Buck, Spring, Beaver, and Bear. The greatest repetition of names occurs in the southeastern counties of Scioto, Washington and Hocking, where the dissected plateau surface is traversed by hundreds of small creeks. Name repetition is so frequent here that it suggests plainly a frontier condition in which settlers had little or no communication or contact with those who lived outside their own little valleys. They may have had no knowledge of those who lived just over the hill from their own settlements. To those residents, the most commonly repeated place name using vegetation terms is the word *sugar,* applied to forty-eight different creeks. Streams to which animal names were applied are numerous. The most common of these terms is the word *wolf,* followed by *turkey. Goose* or *gander,* and *duck, owl, pigeon, pickerel* are other commonly repeated names for streams. At Ohio's distance from sources of sea salt, deposits of that commodity were of particular use to the pioneer family, and its importance is indicated by the large number of streams bearing the generic *salt* or *lick*—thirty-one of them in Ohio alone.[2]

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[1]H. F. Raup, "The Names of Ohio's Streams," *Names,* 5 (1957), 162-168.

[2]John A. Jakle, "Salt on the Ohio Valley Frontier," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers,* 59 (1969), pp. 687 *et seq.*

Because of the terms of settlement by which Connecticut ceded her claim to Ohio lands, northeastern Ohio shows plainly the influence of those who settled west of the Pennsylvania boundary before the formal organization of the state of Ohio in 1803. Thus transfer names from New England were generally applied to townships and communities, but not to natural features. Examples include the names of Windham, Norwalk, New London, Andover, Deerfield, Chatham, and Amherst.[3]

Widespread interest in classical lands of southern Europe early in the nineteenth century—the so-called Greek Revival—is reflected in the naming of towns and cities: Solon, Mantua, Athens, Hannibal, Utica, and Troy, to name a few.[4] But in spite of a moderately large number of German settlers, names transferred from Germany or the German states are not common. This is true also of the Welsh in the southeastern counties, or the Finns in the northeast.

Northwestern Ohio is an extensive lake plain of low relief. Originally it was covered by a dense forest occupying large swamp areas. The forest was cleared and swamplands were drained and converted to farming in the nineteenth century, so this part of Ohio was the most recent to acquire any non-Indian settlements of noticeable size. Its place names are greatly mixed in their origins, and except for the naming of numerous drainage ditches there is no real homogeneity in their characteristics, nor do they express distinctive cultural or national origins of settlers. Defiance, Napoleon, Florida, Continental, Leipsic, Cygnet are located within a circle whose radius is only ten miles. I challenge a name specialist to make sense of that mixture.

Biblical or other religious names are present in some numbers, as they are through most parts of these United States. It is a little difficult to understand what these names would have meant to early settlers—other than the rigidly sacred connotation. The list includes Shiloh, Hiram, Hebron, Medina, Mecca and Gilead. These names are scattered over the state, and no detectable concentrations can be observed. Ohio has its Jerusalem, but no Nazareth that I can find. The more popular names include four Sharons and Lebanons, three Bethels, Canaans, Jerichos, and Zoars. But Salem leads them all with ten repetitions.[5]

Turning attention to the name characteristics of Ohio counties, exactly half, or forty-four, bear the names of families or individuals. Some, like

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[3]David Lindsey, "Place Names in Ohio's Western Reserve," *Names*, 2 (1954), 40-45.

[4]Wilbur Zelinsky, "Classical Town Names in the United States: the Historical Geography of an American Idea," *Geographical Review*, 57 (1967), 463-495.

[5]John Leighly, "Biblical Place-Names in the United States," *Names*, 27 (1979), 46-59.

Hamilton, are named for military or naval personalities or public figures. They include Lawrence, Perry, and Putnam, as well as the inevitable Washington and Jackson. Eighteen of the county names are Indian-related; eight are descriptive such as Highland or Lake; six are of non-English origin, including Gallia and Medina. Counties with Indian names are mainly located in the northern tier near Lake Erie. A solid block of family names occupies the northwestern corner, for the Indians had mainly been moved from that area or had migrated long before the white settlers began to drain the swamplands.

Most of our names are straightforward—the names of families (Roseville), (Poland), (Kent), or they are descriptive (Long Creek). Some are of biological origin (Panther or Painter), classical (Minerva), historical (Columbus), or those reflecting early-day political concepts (Liberty, Freedom). Their preponderance of origins is, of course, English and the English language (Cambridge, Waverly, East Liverpool) perhaps by way of New England. Non-English names are uncommon. Of these, perhaps the most distinctive is Marietta, honoring the queen of Louis XVI.

Though relatively few of Ohio's early settlers were illiterate, their educational level would have been low by modern standards. Hence it is difficult to understand their fondness for using the names of far distant places which they had never seen. An element of the romantic seems to enter the picture at this point. Belfast or London seem not out of place in Ohio; such names could have provided a nostalgic note of appreciation for the homeland, but Cadiz, Toledo, Genoa, Lima, Canton, Mantua, Delhi or Ravenna? These mixtures lead to geographical indigestion. Ohio has five Chesters and Florences and four Bostons and Bristols, and seven Berlins.[6]

Four developments of the mid-nineteenth century contrived to add new names to the Ohio map. Steam navigation on the Ohio River called for frequent overnight stops alongshore. These in turn led to the establishment of small settlements which often bore the name of a local personage or landowner, with the suffix "landing" attached. When rail lines took over the river freighting, the landings were deserted, and for many of these no trace remains today, even though the "landing" name may still appear on modern maps.

The second development was the building of the Ohio canal system, with its main units connecting Lake Erie and the Ohio River. Canal boats had to be locked over the highest parts of this drainage system, so "Lock

[6]William D. Overman, "Ohio Town Names," *Names*, 1 (1953), 115-117.

Seventeen'' or just ''Seventeen'' becomes a relic name of that period, while Campbellsport in Portage County no longer serves as a canal port.

When railways began to dominate the transportation pattern in the 1860's, large numbers of railway stops or stations were established by the officials of the lines. Some of the ''stations'' died on the vine, along with the use of that term as a suffix. Confusion arose when the railroad placed its station at a short distance from a community, and then used the name of the community along with the suffix ''station.'' A prime example occurred in Portage County, where we have Mantua Center, the original settlement, then later Mantua Station nearby. The situation is further confounded when a more recent highway junction is named Mantua Corners.

The fourth circumstance was the development of a national postoffice system. When a new settlement applied for a postoffice or qualified for one, a name had to be selected and agreed upon. Postal regulations required that a name could not duplicate that of any other established postoffice in this state. The United States Postoffice Department, therefore, was responsible for the selection of many names of settlements, and perhaps for the degree of place name confusion that prevails not only in Ohio, but throughout the nation.

If the researcher is seeking peculiar names or those with esoteric origins, he will be disappointed in most Ohio place nomenclature. A very few oddities or freakish names can be spotted on the map, and these are difficult to explain. I hope you have not been disappointed in my reluctance to dwell on name oddities. A quick look produces some that are outstanding. I submit, among others, Ai, Center of the World, Dull, Fleatown, Gabbletown, Hardscrabble, Jumbo, Lickskillet, Pigeye, River Styx, and nine Stringtowns. The human aspect appears in Provident, Purity, Reform, Revenge, Shyville, Success, Henpeck Corners, Modest, and Needful. Unlike Pennsylvania, Ohio has no Intercourse, and no Climax like Michigan. But we do have our Jonestown in Jackson County.

Ohio geographical names, then, generally represent pioneer attitudes to the immediate environment, or the family names of local residents. Few are high-sounding or unusual, and few are of non-English origins. They indicate no overwhelming interest in abstract political ideas. The emphasis is strongly local, representing a sort of divorce from the thinking and interests of the Atlantic coastal states or those cities with their maritime-oriented commercial and naval operations. Here, in this state, are the first evidences of the independent thought of what was to become the eastern-most margin of the American midwest. Put another way, the oldest organized state of the American heartland—a state whose activities de-

pended on lake or stream navigation rather than ocean transport. A state whose people had their eyes fixed on the local scene, and a state in which a wide variety of human streams found it possible to make effective use of natural resources, develop trade, and eventually turn to an industrial economy which prevails today in most sections, at the same time keeping the broad vegetable fields of the northwestern counties, the dairying and corn production of the central and southeastern counties. Ohio's geographical names reflect, in the main, the interests and activities of her people.

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First of all, it must be understood clearly what is meant by place, . . . Place, of course, is a common term and can refer to anything from a building to an entire country. Here, as in most cases, it applies to a part of the earth's surface arbitrarily delimited by an investigation. It may be a whole state, it may be a mining region, or it may be a tract of land comprising a real estate subdivision. Whatever it is, it is down to earth. It is not some elusive fantasy. It is real. It can be seen, traversed and measured.

A. J. Wraight, *The Field Study of Place* (1954), p. 1.