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REPORTS BY GOVERNMENTS ON THE PROGRESS MADE IN THE  
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

- 75th Anniversary (1890-1965) United States  
Board on Geographic Names -

Information paper submitted by the Government of  
the United States of America\*

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## PAPER PRESENTED BY THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA\*

Seventy-five years ago, the trouble caused by geographical name confusion in government publications had become so serious that a handful of federal employees decided that corrective measures were needed. After a winter of discussion of principles and some months of trying to induce conformity with their findings, they concluded that government agencies would not change their ways and use standard names unless told to do so.

### I

The situation was called to the attention of President Benjamin Harrison, who agreed that improvement was needed. On 4 September 1890, he issued an executive order establishing a Board on Geographic Names and provided that "to this Board shall be referred all unsettled questions concerning geographical names which arise in the Departments, and the decisions of the board are to be accepted by these departments as the standard authority in such matters".

Official standardization of geographical names in the United States had begun. The accomplishment of the board and its successors during the past three-quarters of a century reflect the ability, integrity, courage and devotion of men and women in the federal service. More than 200 have served without additional compensation as board members or deputy members or as members of advisory committees or groups. Hundreds more have participated in staff work.

### II

Geographical name standardization by the Federal Government has been marked by five principal periods beginning, respectively, in 1890, 1927, 1934, 1943 and 1947. In the first thirty-seven years—1890–1927—the successive boards were independent, but had no staff. In the next seven-year period—1927–1934—the board had a staff of one to three persons.

In 1934, the independent board was abolished in a general reorganization of the Executive Branch, and the functions were transferred to the Department of the Interior.

The former board was essentially reconstituted as an advisory committee and its staff of one to three persons became a division in Interior. The title "US Board on Geographical Names", later was assigned to the committee and division taken together. In 1943, after nine years, the staff was greatly enlarged to meet wartime demands and the advisory committee was reactivated, beginning a short but significant period of four years.

The present period began with the statutory authority act of 25 July 1947, creating a new board to act conjointly with the Secretary of the Interior.

In the first period, which began in 1890, the general framework of name policy was laid down and tested. A few foreign names were handled from the very first, and some county names were systematically treated. In 1916, a committee of the board urged a more aggressive programme to standardize names *before* they caused serious confusion rather than afterward. The function of co-ordinating mapping was assigned by executive order, and before

that responsibility was reassigned to the Board of Surveys and Maps, the first set of standard symbols for topographic maps were developed. Cumulative lists of standardized names were published in 1892, 1901, 1906, 1916 and 1922.

In the second period, which began in 1927, the pace was accelerated by active committees and a paid staff. The "first report on foreign names", containing some 2,500 names, included a few of the more important names from each country, and some of the changes were made following the First World War. Large lists of names in Hawaii and the Philippines were made official. A cumulative report, published in 1933 contained about 25,000 domestic and foreign names.

During the third period, which started in 1934, the range of interest and activity was progressively narrowed and practically no foreign names were standardized. An executive committee of three gradually took over the functions of the full advisory committee, which did not meet at all from 1941 to 1944. Three or four hundred domestic names were decided each year and were published at year's end, but the board was quite unprepared for the Second World War.

The fourth period began in 1943 when, at the request of some fifteen federal agencies and with ample working funds, the Department of the Interior quickly organized and assembled a large staff and began mass production to meet war needs. Indexes of names on the maps used in the invasion of Europe were prepared on short notice and filled a real need. Some 3 million Chinese, Japanese and Korean names were transcribed systematically into Roman letters, most of them for the first time.

"Guides" to the geographical names of China, Japan and Korea were prepared which included transcription systems, general rules, analysis of sources, tables showing Chinese characters and corresponding syllabic characters, and romanizations. These tools are still useful to a wide range of people in and out of government. For many roman alphabet countries, "directions" citing the pertinent board-approved policies and evaluating the source material gave some help. However, they could not produce enough uniformity in names and, after the war, when new material made them obsolete rapidly, they were dropped. The new material also showed up the deficiencies in wartime information. Accordingly, in many parts of the world it was necessary to start afresh. Intelligence studies quickly made it obvious that individual name standardization in volume was indispensable, and the board's help was sought. The gazetteer programme was started because it became clear that it was more useful and cheaper to standardize names before confusion occurred than to unravel confusion. Also, in that war time period and immediately thereafter, domestic name standardization was greatly increased and record systems were established.

The fifth period began on 25 July 1947, with the enactment of legislation authorizing geographical name standardization and creating the present Board on Geographic Names. Members were appointed and the first meeting was held on 15 September 1947. The volume of foreign names processed each year since 1947 has made it impractical for the board's committees to examine each name individually before approval. Instead, committee approval is sought first for policies and for individual names that raise policy questions, illustrate policy problems, or involve changes in names previously acted upon individu-

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ally. Files of names, by country or area, are then approved *en masse* as official standard names. This procedure also was followed in standardizing names for Alaska and Hawaii.

Because of the weight assigned to local usage in the case of domestic names, a "docket list" procedure was developed. A brief was prepared for each name and a recommendation made. Recommended names, with identifying descriptions, were then compiled in docket lists for board consideration not earlier than thirty days from the release date. The lists were circulated to the board members and also were given to the Press wire services with an invitation for comment. Any names questioned then were considered individually; the others were approved as recommended. More than 9,000 names were approved in the fiscal year 1949.

During the 1950s, a systematic examination of terms used in all geographical names on the topographic maps of the United States, and the mapping of their distribution, provided many surprises. For example: most of the named "summits" actually were found to have higher land on either side and many were in the bottom of deep valleys; they had been named "summits" simply because they were the high points on railway and highway grades.

Incontrovertible evidence was provided that the variety of terms and of connotations of terms used in names was far greater than had been suspected. Many clues were uncovered leading to a better understanding of the evolution of both names and terms, and showing how to identify named things so that communication about them would not be distorted.

### III

In 1958, after domestic name standardization had been greatly reduced by lack of funds, the Geological Survey took over the staff work and record keeping and publication of decisions on domestic names. The docket list procedure was then resumed, with some changes.

For years all intelligence materials produced were edited for name consistency and conformity. However, the gazetteers gradually made it easier to obtain the correct names and so the editing programme which had dealt with more than a half million names a year, was largely phased out. The gazetteers of official standard names were classified for a few years, but later were made available to the public. The first sixty-eight were sale documents. The last twenty have been free, since it was found more economical to issue them on that basis.

Advisory committees, provided for in the authorizing act, have been created to deal with Antarctic, Arabic, Persian and undersea features. In addition, committees in some of the states have operated at various times.

These three committees have brought expert knowledge to bear on special problems. The committee dealing with the Antarctic, when it was established in 1943, faced the monumental problem of bringing order into the chaotic geographic nomenclature of a vast, inaccessible, inhospitable continent, an expanse larger than the United States.

Exploration and naming had been done by individuals from many countries. Many of the records were scattered, fragmentary or conflicting. Extraordinary hazards of travel and frequently poor visibility had led to observational errors. Navigation by sea, land, or air encounters special problems in polar areas. Reported positions were sometimes greatly in error, and features could not be

found where other explorers had located them. Naming rules applicable to the area were developed, tested and approved. Later, other countries adopted similar rules and set up or reactivated more or less comparable committees.

Over a period of a dozen years, the United States committee and staff collected and digested reports, books, maps, charts, photographs, log books and flight records, plotted positions, traced and retraced routes, corresponded and conferred with explorers and cartographers. The resulting answers to "who named what, when, for whom, why and where" provided the basis for acceptance of names or for choice among alternatives. By the beginning of the International Geophysical Year 1959, the nomenclature had been fixed well enough so that the new IGY and post-IGY names could be fitted in as exploration proceeded. In less than two decades, chaotic confusion in names in the Antarctic has been resolved into an orderly nomenclature largely agreed upon internationally.

### IV

The systematic processing of names from Arabic and Persian involves not only screening out dialectical variations, but also supplying the short vowels that are commonly not written and in names where they are not apparent from the context. To fashion an example from English: one might readily make "batter" from "bttr" in a story about baseball, but "Bggs" for the small town where the game was played could be "Baggs", "Beggs", "Biggs", "Boggs" or even "Buggs". Reconstruction of the whole name is accomplished by identifying the language of origin, etymologizing the word or words that present problems, and then converting to Roman letters systematically. This is a difficult and complicated process, but the committee has developed a high degree of skill in applying it. More than 100,000 names have been processed from Arabic and Persian and standardized in this manner.

The Advisory Committee on Undersea Features has made excellent progress in its one and one-half years of operation, but actually is only well started. Exploration of the oceans and their basins has been sharply increased in recent years. More and better equipped expeditions have gained new knowledge and new insights. Old features have taken on a new look and new kinds of features have been discovered. Names for these features and terms to describe them need to keep pace with discoveries. The committee helps both in the focusing of information about past and present exploration and in the developing of names and terms for international agreement.

During most of the fifth period—the current one—continuing attention has been paid to international co-operation and standardization. World acceptance of the idea of international name standardization through international co-operation and based on nationally standardized written forms has developed step by step. At the request of the United Nations, an international programme was designed and is being carried out. Some of the recommended actions have already been taken and a major one, an international conference, will be held in Geneva in August 1967.

### V

Co-operation with individual countries also has proceeded. Cordial relations with the comparable agency in

Canada were established soon after the 1943 reorganization and have been continued. Close co-operation with the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names in the United Kingdom began in 1947 with the adoption of a joint system for Romanizing Cyrillic and now includes not only all the Romanization systems, but also most phases of operations.

## VI

During three quarters of a century, the work of the Board of Geographical Names has been characterized by successes and disappointments, but attainments have far overshadowed setbacks.

Included among its many accomplishments are:

Development of a well-tested body of policies;

Establishment of a list of more than 3 million standard names, with supporting evidence for each;

A standard name file for every part of the world, including extensive files of names converted into Roman-letter forms from other scripts by systems developed and adopted jointly with one or more other countries;

A solid foundation for international co-operation and assured continuation of this upon which to build further;

A beginning of an understanding of the processes by which geographical features get names, how such names become accepted, and how understandable terms promote acceptance of programmes and further the spread of information and knowledge.

## PAPER PRESENTED BY SPAIN<sup>1</sup>

The Commission on Geographical Names carries out its work each year on the basis of the cartographic work plans which are co-ordinated and prepared by the Superior Geographical Council. Independently of these plans, it deals on a current basis with the problems relating to the standardization of geographical names which arise in all regions, and for this purpose it seeks information from the various local and provincial technical agencies as a basis for its studies and eventual decisions. The standardization of Spanish geographical names is affected by certain peculiarities resulting from the survival of Iberian roots and the later incorporation of the classical designations of the west and the east. It is therefore not surprising that, in addition to a learned and even conventional form of a place name, there will exist two or more other names which are well known locally and have a considerable cultural tradition, even though in official usage they survive only as the designation of the inhabitants of the locality. The following are some examples in this regard taken from the *Diccionario Ideológico de la Lengua Española* (second edition, 1966):

<i>Place names</i>	<i>Names of inhabitants</i>
Alcalá de Henares (Madrid)	alcalahino, complutense
Mérida (Badajoz)	emeritense, merideño
Sevilla	sevillano, hispalense, itálico
Toledo	toledano, carpetano
León	leonés, legionense
Lérida	leridano, ildense
Zaragoza	zaragozano, cesaraugustano saldubense <sup>2</sup>

The same situation exists with regard to some of the more important orthographic systems, although in this case the historical designations have more easily been supplanted through the introduction of a more rational terminology and as a result of the less developed state of general research on the geographical aspects of Spanish regionalism in so far as mountains are concerned. We thus have, for example: Sistema Central (Carpeto-vetónico); Cordillera Cantábrica (Galibéricos, Cantábricos and Astúricos); Sierra Morena (Mariánica); and Montes de Toledo (Oretana). Among the important rivers, the archaic designation has been retained in popular usage only in the case of the Guadalquivir (Betis or Baetis), although among the specialists and in official usage this name is used to refer to the river basin as a whole because of the geological

and orogenic importance of the ancient depression which linked the Mediterranean with the ocean. A more rational geographical terminology also applies to the regional divisions, since today the two main subdivisions of the Spanish meseta are designated as north and south instead of the former Castilla la Vieja and Castilla la Nueva. There is, however, within the government administration a regional revisionist trend towards a better accommodation between natural resources and social and economic development.

As far as the less important geographical names are concerned, the adoption of a single standard has given way to practical considerations. Thus the existence of dialects has made it necessary, especially for postal purposes, to accept duplicate spellings or duplicate versions for some of the smaller localities. This has been due to a reluctance to accept the rules of spelling and grammar and adapt them to the prevailing regional dialects. To take an example, the entries under the letter "A" in the Spanish postal directory (*Diccionario Geográfico Postal de España*) include variant spellings for forty-eight localities. Increasing contacts with the rest of the country, however, and the influence of publicity media will probably lead to a decline, in the villages, of the forms rooted in oral tradition and their replacement by the forms based on standard usage. This will not, on the other hand, be true of forms corresponding to the dominant dialect, for these will most logically survive and come to be accepted as authentically reflecting the prevailing vernacular situation.

Although there would be little point in reporting on everything that is being done in Spain with regard to geographical terminology, both national and international, a tribute must be paid to the many philologists and specialists who have aided our research and whose efforts will make possible the publication of such important works as the *Enciclopedia Lingüística Hispánica* of the CSIC (volume I published in 1960), in which seven specialists take up the most important aspects of toponymy in the pre-Roman, Phoenician, Punic, Latin, Germanic, Arab and reconquest periods. Such studies will encourage a resurgence of geographical research in fields of toponymy, especially in conjunction with such works as the great history of Spain which is being co-ordinated and directed by that outstanding authority, Menéndez Pidal, the linguistic atlases and the etymological and dialectal dictionaries, the quality of which is being constantly improved.

The increased interest in geographical names is further reflected in the 1960 gazetteer of the National Institute of

<sup>1</sup> The original text of this paper appeared as document E/CONF. 53/L.35.

<sup>2</sup> This form exists, although it is not recorded in the *Diccionario*.