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SIXTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE
ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
New York, 25 August-3 September 1992
Item 4 of the Provisional Agenda*

REPORTS BY DIVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTS ON THE SITUATION IN
THEIR REGIONS AND COUNTRIES ON THE PROGRESS MADE IN
IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
SINCE THE FIFTH CONFERENCE

United States Board on Geographic Names:
An Agency Established by Law
to Serve the US Government and the Public
Submitted by United States of Americas**/

* E/CONF.85/1 Rev. 1

**/ Prepared by Dr. Richard R. Randall, Executive Secretary, US
Board on Geographic Names

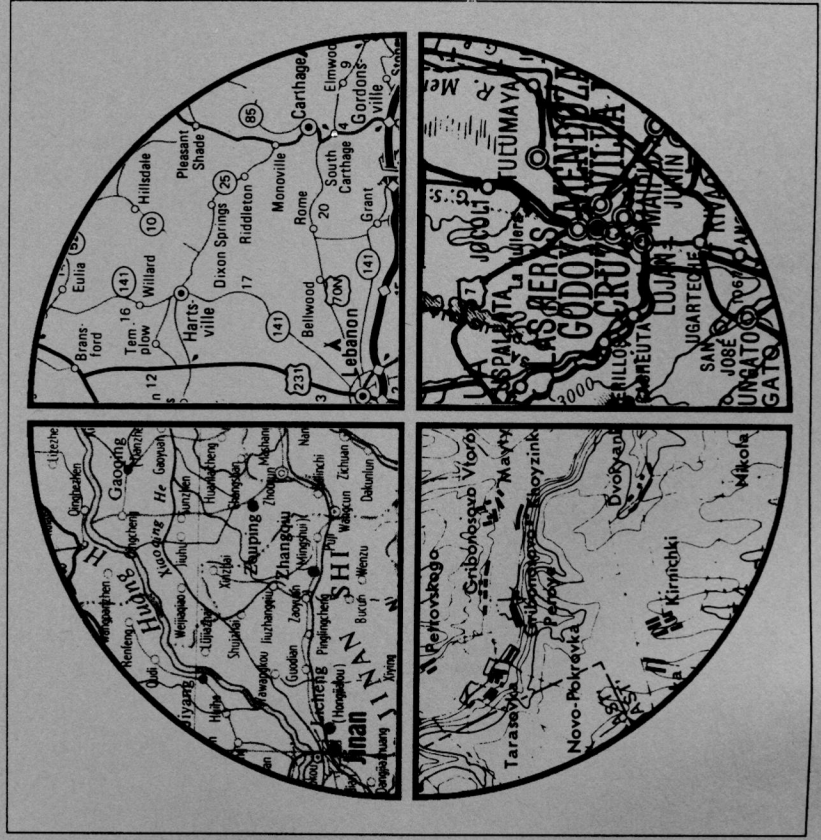
**A PUBLICATION--"UNITED STATES BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES:
AN AGENCY ESTABLISHED BY LAW TO SERVE THE US GOVERNMENT
AND THE PUBLIC"**

The Board's Centennial Committee decided it would be appropriate to revise a brochure about the Board published several years earlier. While the publication provides background on the Board and the work of its committees, it also reflects topics of more current interest.



United States Board on Geographic Names

AN AGENCY ESTABLISHED BY LAW TO SERVE
THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AND THE PUBLIC



The United States Board on Geographic Names

By Richard R. Randall
Executive Secretary

Introduction

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) is the agency of the Federal Government that develops policies, principles, and procedures governing the spelling, use, and application of geographic names—domestic, foreign, Antarctic, and undersea. Its decisions enable all departments and agencies of the Federal Government to have access to uniform names of geographic features. In practice, it determines the standardized place names which Americans use every day and take for granted.

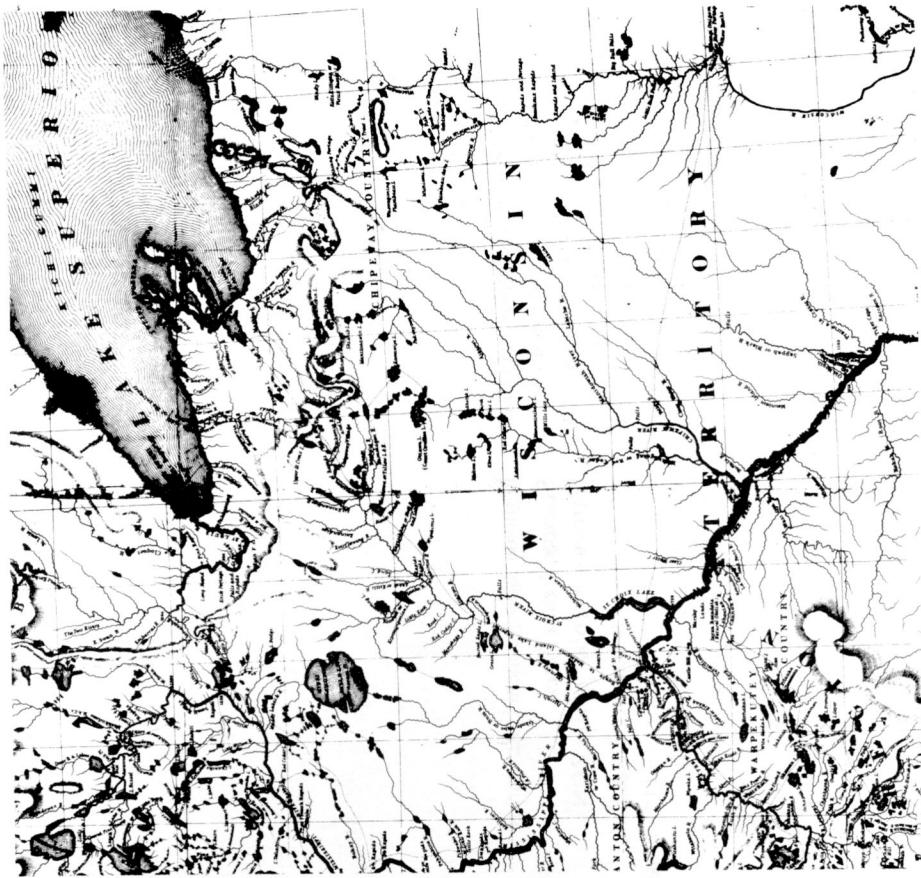
Every year, the Board reviews about 1,000 new domestic names and suggested changes. Less than a third of them are approved. In an average year, the Board may also approve many thousands of foreign names. At the same time, the Board serves as a single authority in the United States to which all problems and inquiries concerning geographic names throughout the world may be addressed. It conducts surveys of foreign geographic names and participates in international activities to help standardize place names across

linguistic and political boundaries.

Standardizing Place

Names – Purpose of the BGN

Since human beings first began to speak, there has been a need to name places—natural or manmade geographic features—as much as there has been a need to name objects, concepts, and people themselves. So long as people spoke the same language and lived in the same area, place names, like object names, became accepted and caused little confusion. Once exploration took place or different people came into contact with one another, however, people applied new names to geographic features or spelled old names in their own languages. As a result, reports sent to administering authorities often imparted inexact or conflicting information about places. In the latter part of the 19th century, a flood of maps and other publications greatly increased people's knowledge of geography. Without standardizing place names, there was a greatly increased chance for error and confusion.



Early map of western section of United States, showing names applied by surveyors or explorers in the field.

Today, most countries producing maps of their territories have national geographic names authorities for the standardization of domestic place names and for international cooperation. In the 20th century, the BGN and other national authorities also have had to cope with place names in uninhabited parts of the world such as Antarctica and the depths of the oceans. Apart from discoveries of new geographic features, today's toponymy is characterized by changes in geographic names brought about by political changes, by modification of spelling systems in various areas, and by other factors. Altogether, the task of keeping current files on world names is nearly as difficult as it was 100 years ago. For this reason, experts from many countries often attend meetings sponsored by the United Nations for the purpose of working out international programs for the standardization of geographic names.

Keeping Pace With America's Growth - History of the BGN

In the United States, the need for standardization of place names became acute with the opening of the West. Exploration reports, mining claims, and land surveys often referred to rivers, mountains, settlements, and other features by different names. Some names were new; other were taken from oral usage or respelled from French or Spanish documents. Recognizing the need to resolve conflicts, President Benjamin Harrison created the Board on Geographic Names on September 4, 1890, and named Dr. T. C. Mendenhall, Superintendent of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, as its first Chairman.

Originally, the Board was used primarily to adjudicate "unsettled questions concerning geographic names," but in 1906 President Theodore Roosevelt extended its responsibilities to include the standardization of all place names for Federal use and to approve new names and name changes. The Board's "First Report on Foreign Names" was published in 1927 to reflect the many boundary and place name changes resulting from World War I. But BGN's involvement with overseas names increased dramatically during World War II when millions of foreign names were standardized, including names converted into roman letters of about 3 million Chinese, Japanese, and Korean names.

The Board's most significant reorganization took place on July 25, 1947, when Congress passed Public Law 242-80 establishing BGN in its present form.

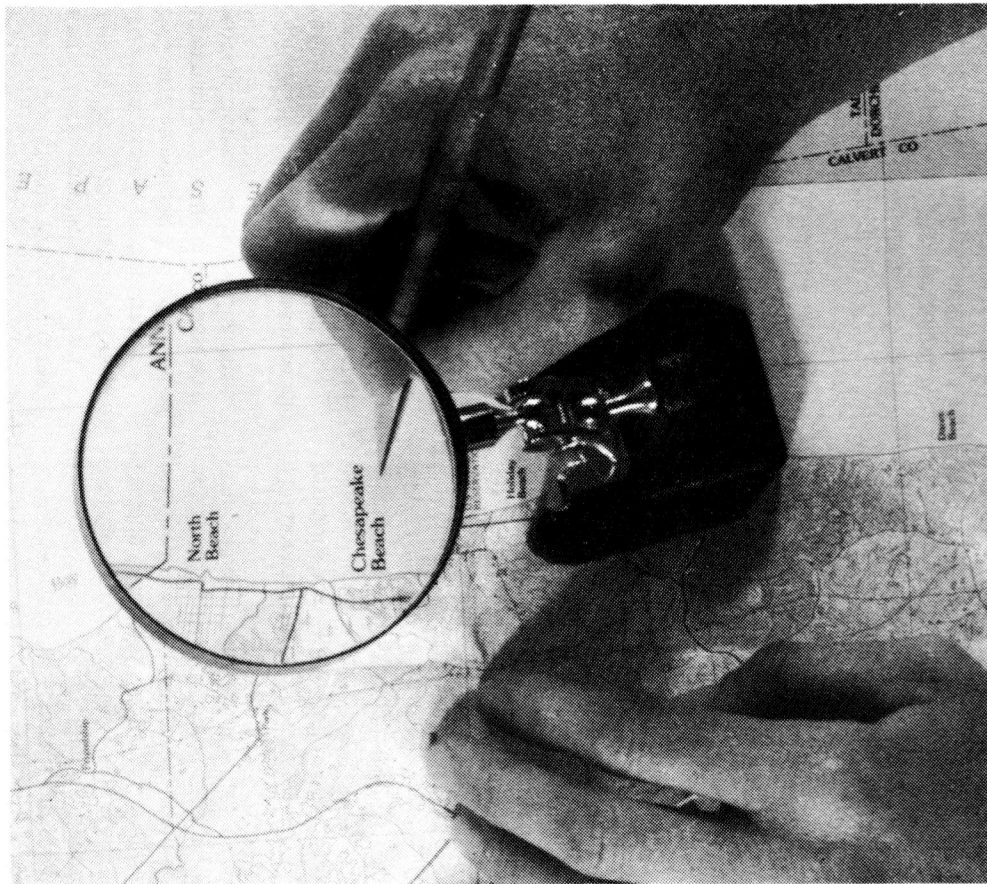
An Agency of Agencies - Organization of the BGN

The BGN is founded on the basis of cooperation among all of the Federal departments and agencies which are concerned with geographic names. In fact, the BGN does not have employees or facilities of its own but relies on cooperating Federal agencies for staff support and meeting space. The Board itself consists of representatives from the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Interior, and State; the Central Intelligence Agency; the Government Printing Office; the Library of Congress; and the Postal Service. Its Chairman is appointed by the Secretary of the Interior on nomination of the Board.

The Board is responsible for name decisions but carries out its work in different ways. The Domestic Names Committee (DNC), the Foreign Names Committee (FNC), the Executive Committee, and the Publications Committee approve names or take other action in accordance with Board policies. Advisory committees, composed of experts in specified geographic or topical areas and appointed by the Secretary of the Interior (with whom the Board shares its responsibilities), submit their recommendations to the Board. Over the years, several advisory committees have been established, but the main ones have been the Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names and the Advisory Committee on Undersea Features. Two executive secretaries--one for Domestic Geographic Names and one for Foreign Geographic Names--also are active in directing programs. One of the secretaries serves as executive secretary of the Board.

The Naming of America – BGN Activities in the United States

The Executive Secretary for Domestic Geographic Names and a staff are provided by the U.S. Geological Survey, an agency of the Department of the Interior. The DNC is the arm of BGN responsible for standardizing the names of all geographic features within the 50 States and other areas under the sovereignty of the United States. The Board itself does not initiate the naming of unnamed domestic features but considers new names and name changes proposed by local authorities, by the public, or by Federal agencies.



A cartographer applies a name to a map.

The guiding principle of the DNC is to work closely and cooperatively with all interested agencies, groups, or individuals for standardization of geographic names. To be useful, geographic names must be acceptable to local citizens, government agencies situated in the locality and others actually using the names. Thus, the Board's domestic names policy is to determine and recognize for official Federal use geographic names, including their spelling and application, which are in present-day local usage. When such usage is conflicting or weak, the Board considers well-established documented names and names with historical significance.

Experience shows that local citizens and other name users often resent and even resist using names that commemorate people. Following a long-established policy, the Board will not approve new domestic names that honor or may be construed to honor living persons. The name of a deceased person may be adopted if it is determined to be in the public interest to honor the person or family for historical or other commemorative reasons. To justify adoption by the Board, the person or family being honored should have been associated with the feature being named or have made a significant contribution to the area of the feature or the state in which it is located.

In conformance with other principles, the Board may disapprove names that are confusing, or that are derogatory to a particular person, race, or religion.

The Naming of America – Proposals for New Names or Name Changes

Every year the Board receives hundreds of proposals for new names to be applied to previously unnamed features for administrative, reference, or commemorative purposes. Several factors are considered when reviewing proposals. New names should be imaginative and distinctive. The Board prefers names descriptive of topographic forms; names suggested by local history, folklore, and incidents; or names associated with natural life or other phenomena. There is a restriction on the number and kind of new names approved for features in National Parks and Wilderness Areas because it is in the public interest to maintain the wilderness character of these areas.

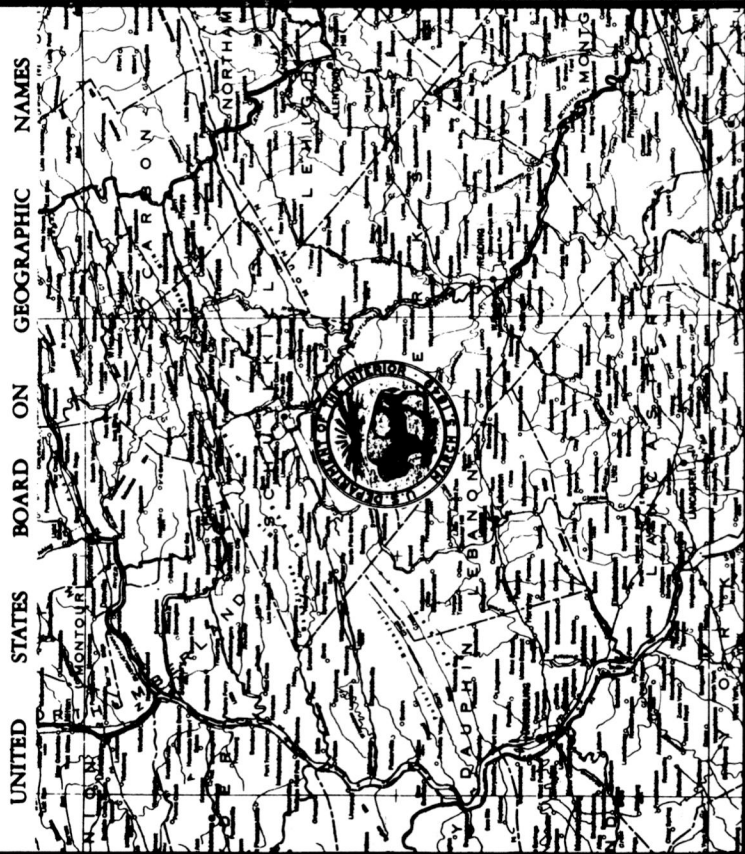
Proposals for new names should include: full name being proposed; location and clear identification of the feature to be named; reason for wishing to name the feature; and origin or meaning of the proposed name. If the proposed name honors a person, the following additional information is needed: full name of the person; birth and death dates (year) of the person, if known; person's title and/or profession or occupation; and person's association with the feature or area.

The Board also considers many name change proposals. Sometimes two nearby features have similar names, or a published name may be inappropriate or in conflict with local usage. Anyone requesting a name change should clearly

Decisions on Geographic Names IN THE UNITED STATES

October through December 1989

*Decision List 8904
(including corrections to previous Lists)*



Decisions made by the BGN Domestic Names Committee are published in pamphlets and also in a series of state gazetteers.

state the reason for doing so, as well as the possible affect of the proposed change on local citizens.

Name problems and proposals submitted to the Board are individually studied by the research staff at the Geological Survey and put on a monthly docket list for consideration by the DNC. The list is distributed to cooperating Federal and State agencies and to interested organizations and individuals about a month before the committee meeting at which the names in the list are to be considered. Reviewing the merits of

each case, the committee decides between conflicting names and approves or disapproves proposed new names and name changes. Decisions of the committee normally become decisions of the Board and are published as "Decisions on Geographic Names in the United States." In addition, a series of state gazetteers is being produced.

These publications are sent to governmental agencies, libraries, organizations, and interested persons through out the United States and many other countries.

The Board Works in Foreign Areas

The Foreign Names Committee (FNC) carries out BGN programs to standardize names, for Federal use, of geographic features in all national territories outside the jurisdiction of the United States, but in no case does it play a role in selecting new names in foreign areas. The FNC staff and the Executive Secretary for Foreign Geographic Names are provided by the Defense Mapping Agency, part of the Department of Defense.

To accomplish goals of standardizing foreign names, BGN works as closely as possible with names authorities and similar agencies in other countries. Over the years, particularly close contact has been maintained with the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for Official British Use (PCGN) and the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names. In addition to maintaining liaison with foreign agencies and international organizations, such as the United Nations, BGN reviews a

wide variety of foreign documents in order to obtain current information about geographic names.

For countries using the roman alphabet, BGN adopts names that appear in maps, charts, or other documents produced by official agencies. In some instances, however, materials are incomplete and the FNC has to work with such items as census reports, other official documents, and railroad timetables to develop a complete picture of geographic nomenclature. Sometimes, the BGN also permits the use of "conventional" names which have become established in English even though they differ from local official names. For example, Munich is the conventional form for the city known locally as München, Cologne for Köln, Vienna for Wien, Rome for Roma, and Venice for Venezia.

For countries using a nonroman-alphabet (such as Greece), names must be converted to roman letters through the use of transliteration or transcription

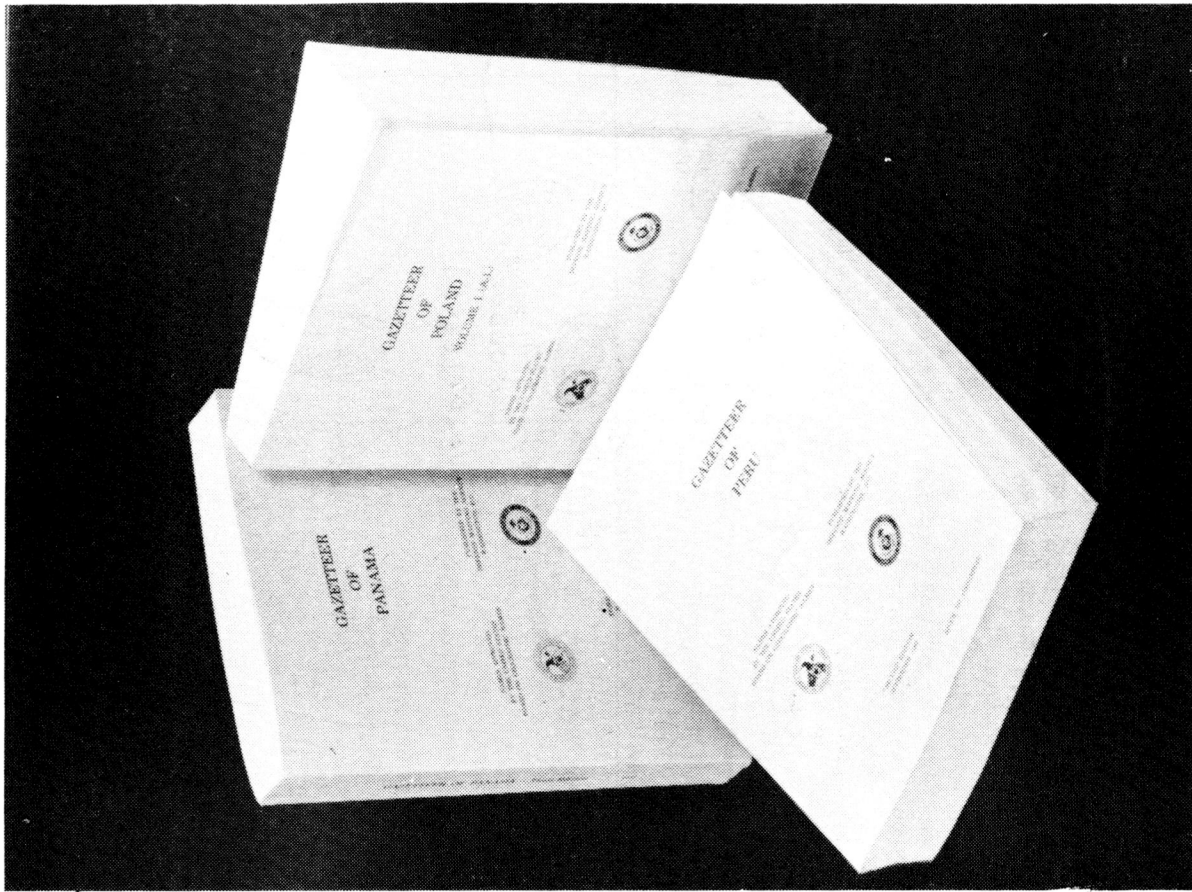
systems. BGN and PCGN have joint systems for all major nonroman-alphabet countries and many of the minor ones as well, and have established voluminous files of names on the basis of these systems.

BGN has prepared more than 175 national

or regional gazetteers listing foreign place names with locational data and covering virtually all areas of the world. Published by the Defense Mapping Agency to meet Federal needs, the gazetteers also are in heavy demand by universities, publishers, and libraries in the United States and abroad.

Name in Original Script	Name in BGN/PCGN Romanized Form	Language	Name in Conventional English Form	Country
МОСКВА	MOSKVA	Russian	MOSCOW	Soviet Union
КИЇВ	KYYIV	Ukrainian	KIEV	Soviet Union
北京	BEIJING	Chinese	PEKING	China
القاهرة	AL QĀHIRAH	Arabic	CAIRO	Egypt
کابل	KĀBOL	Persian	KABUL	Afghanistan
ΑΘΗΝΑΙ	ATHINAI	Greek	ATHENS	Greece
አዲስ ፡ አበባ ፡	ĀDĪS ĀBEBA	Amharic	ADDIS ABABA	Ethiopia
ရန်ကင်း	YANGŌN	Burmese	RANGOON	Burma

Examples of geographic names in nonroman writing systems as transliterated into roman letters. Conventional names also shown.



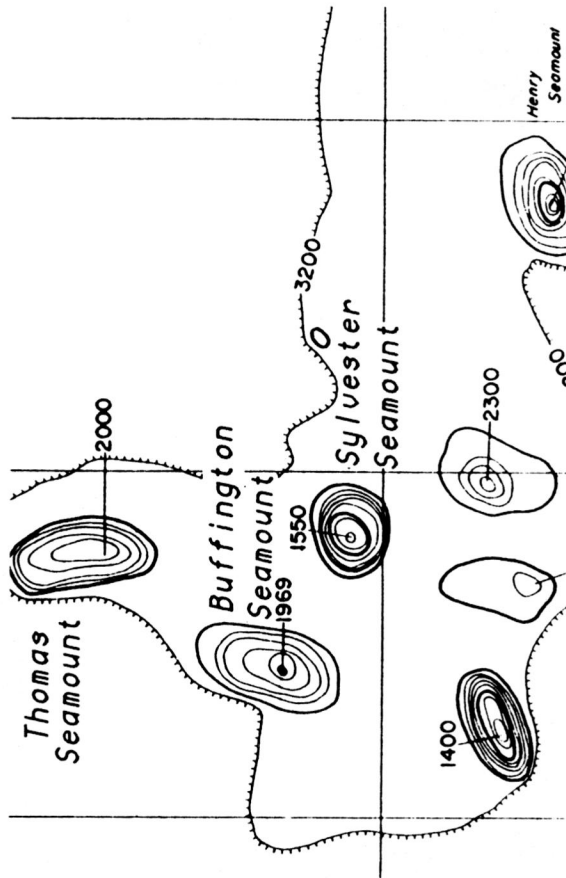
Recently published gazetteers.

Advisory committees are created by the Secretary of the Interior at the request of the Board to meet requirements for names in areas where new mapping programs are underway or to deal with other name issues. Members of the advisory committees are chosen for their

particular knowledge of such areas or issues and have close ties with other scientists and researchers. The two present bodies, Advisory Committees on Antarctic Names and on Undersea Features, actually adopt new names for previously unnamed features.

American Institute of Geography and History, and have worked with the International Congress on Onomastic Sciences. The Board has given practical on-the-job training to several individuals

from Australia, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Thailand. These efforts represent a BGN goal to share its experiences in names standardization with all other nations.



Section of a bathymetric chart showing named seamounts.

The Board and International Cooperation

For many years, the Board has been active in international programs. Of major significance was action by members and staff in 1958 to develop a statement on international names cooperation at the request of the United Nations. That statement led to a recognition by the UN that world communications would be enhanced through programs assuring standardized names. In 1967 the first UN Conference on Geographic Names took

place; the fifth conference was held in 1987. BGN representatives have been active in all phases of UN work and have helped develop sound principles, policies, and procedures now being applied by many other countries. Individuals also have worked with the International Hydrographic Organization on names of undersea features, have taught methods of names standardization to Latin American countries through the Pan

In Service to the Public – How to Contact the BGN

The BGN, its committees, and support staffs are effective and money saving because they rely on other Federal agencies for personnel and facilities and because their work is based on cooperation both at home and abroad. The chief beneficiaries are the people of the United States. They benefit by having access to orderly and uniform information about geographic features throughout the United States and the world.

Private citizens, mapmakers, publishers, libraries, academic and research institutions, and government agencies—Federal, State, local, and foreign—make frequent use of the Board's services. Any person or organization—public or private—may inquire about geographic names or request the Board to resolve name problems and, in the case of domestic names, propose new names or name changes.

For general information about the Board, or for specific information about foreign geographic names, write to:

Executive Secretary
U.S. Board on Geographic Names
and
Executive Secretary
BGN Foreign Geographic Names
Defense Mapping Agency
8613 Lee Highway
Fairfax, Virginia 22031-2137

Telephone: (703) 285-9518

For specific information about geographic names in the United States, write to:

Executive Secretary
BGN Domestic Geographic Names
U.S. Geological Survey
National Center (523)
12201 Sunrise Valley Drive
Reston, Virginia 22092

Telephone: (703) 648-4506