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THE CLASSIFICATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL ENTITIES AND GEOGRAPHICAL
NAMES IN THE PROVINCE OF ONTARIO, CANADA

Paper submitted by the Government of Canada*

I. THE PROBLEM

While respecting the opinions and priorities of other statutory, legal and academic authorities in matters of geographical terminology, this paper examines (1) the difficulties involved in making a geographical nomenclature board of Ontario operational, (2) the problems associated with accommodating a definitive classification of geographical features and names to older and unformulated principles and procedures, and, (3) the implementation of a local usage rationale in defining the jurisdictional boundaries of the new board.

II. OBJECTIVES

As the recently appointed statutory authority for the provision and maintenance of a systematic geographical nomenclature for the Province of Ontario, the Ontario Geographic Names Board (OGNB) has as its aim the establishment and maintenance of principles and procedures which will provide:

(a) A classification of geographical features within the Province as a necessary step in defining the jurisdictional boundaries of the new provincial nomenclature board;

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(b) Definitions of operating principles and procedures which would clarify the Ontario names board's position vis à vis other statutory authorities regarding the status of legal and political territorial divisions as geographical entities and geographical names;

(c) A classificatory scheme of geographical names and categories currently employed by the Ontario names board for the use of cartographers, geographers and other government departments;

(d) A satisfactory definition of the terms "geographical feature" and "place", key words in the Act which currently defines the Ontario names board's jurisdictional area with regard to name approval or rescission;

(e) An argument supporting the Ontario names board's claim to full jurisdictional powers over all geographical names generated by local usage.

III. FACTORS

The provincial nomenclature authority

The Ontario Geographic Names Board established by statute in 1968, brought into force by royal proclamation in April of 1969, and operational in 1971 with the appointment of its full complement of seven members in July of that year, is, in matters determining what names shall or shall not be applied to unincorporated places and natural geographical features, the decisive statutory authority. In decisions involving orthography, language, scale and degree of duplication or uniformity, the Board's recommendations to the Ontario Minister of Natural Resources (formerly Lands and Forests) are, once approved, final.

Such recommendations usually take the form of submissions for approval or rescission of names in current use - in the verbal sense - or those recorded in documented form. These names appear, when approved, as official nomenclature on topographical and planimetric maps of the province.

IV. PLACES

"Places" (in established departmental usage over the years) refer to physical features in the landscape containing populated built-up areas such as unincorporated villages and such small loosely organized communities as farmsteads. Legal divisions, on the other hand, such as geographical and municipal townships, parks or reserves, and municipal subdivisions such as residential suburbs have names which are properly governed by statutory authorities other than The Ontario Geographic Names Board.

V. GEOGRAPHIC FEATURE

"Geographical feature" (once again in established departmental usage) refers to both natural (physiographic) and artificial (man-made) features in the landscape. With particular regard to natural geographical features (lakes, peninsulas, islands, rivers, mountains and so on), the Board exercises full jurisdiction. Names of man-made features such as causeways, reservoirs, canals, etc. are outside the Board's decisive jurisdiction except in so far as the Board furnishes relevant name information to the authorities directly responsible for a feature's existence.

VI. LOCAL USAGE

Prime consideration is accorded established - and current - local usage in the determination of the most accurate and fitting name or designation for officially unnamed natural features - on the strength of reliable documented evidence (in the case of local verbal authority) which is supplied to the Board.

It is important to point out that with regard to such name petitions the OGNB is properly concerned only with the determination of the name, designation, or names in use locally. The Board, furthermore, does not assume responsibility for making moral, legal or political judgements on the suitability of a personal name in the light of a person's reputation. Ontario would hardly have a Stalin Township if it did.

VII. THE QUESTION OF PROPRIETY

The Board has on record a number of name changes made in another decade when public sensibilities were otherwise and names quite innocuous in today's world were then rescinded outright. Though name changes are still necessary today, they are made for reasons which would never have received a hearing in the past - and vice versa. The Ontario Board has, in this regard, agreed not to interfere with or censure established names which in themselves (whether in the spoken or written record) offend no one, with the possible exception of those persons more familiar with the individual's personal record. The Board would be faced with a continuous and expensive process of name revision and rescission if it assumed the role of toponymic inquisitor. The provincial board therefore, treats name proposals involving moral, political or linguistic factors very carefully.

VIII. NATURAL FEATURES WITHIN ARTIFICIAL FEATURES

This raises the difficult question of jurisdictional boundaries; in particular, the relatively new problem of defining the nature and range of the Board's authority in areas of decisions affecting the adoption or rescission of names of natural topographical features and unincorporated communities which fall within the geographical boundaries of a municipality. The Board is already confronted with a frustratingly large number of natural features within "town" and "village" boundaries, even though the features themselves are buried miles deep in a wilderness area.

IX. PROCEDURE

A study of procedures used over the years by the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests, and, more recently by the nomenclature board, indicate a movement away from arbitrary naming of natural features to one which accords prime consideration to local usage. This is the basic argument supporting the categories of geographical names which the Board has decided should come under its full jurisdiction and which should reflect its policy affecting the adoption or rescission of geographical feature names.

This has brought about the careful definition of the term "geographical feature", per se, in the light of the above categories, as prerequisite to any attempt made to classify the name or toponym attributed to it. The provincial board's jurisdiction, therefore, with regard to a geographical feature's proposed name, in the sense of its power of veto over it, rests first and foremost on how the feature is defined. This calls for differentiating, in the interests of classification, between those features which are dominantly natural and those which are artificial. Similar logic is applied to the implementation of procedures concerned with processing names of incorporated or unincorporated communities.

The names of natural features are, in accord with the provincial board's enabling legislation, recommended to the new minister of natural resources for his formal approval, non-approval or rescission, as the case may be. While such decisions are now the full responsibility of the recently established Ontario Board, in the past such matters were channeled entirely through the cartography section of the Provincial Department of Lands and Forests.

X. FEATURES EXTANT, FEATURES EXTINCT

Once approved, lists of names and their locational data are forwarded to the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (CPCGN) for transfer to national maps as official names. With the same qualifications and exceptions applying, similar procedures govern the processing of names of unincorporated communities and toponymically related area and locality names as do in the case of natural features. Natural feature names may be those of features still in existence or those which have ceased to exist in their old form - the important factor in common being that the name itself is still in use. The Board's responsibility is, after all, names, not features.

The recording of all locally inspired nomenclature on the official maps of the land is an operation wholly dependent upon decisions made by the Board or by the CPCGN. All names in this category share one important characteristic: they are generated by local usage, that is they spring from the oral traditions of the community itself - not from above or outside of it.

Names of legal, political or otherwise artificial geographical features (such as incorporated communities, counties, districts, airports, parks, bridges, townships, municipal subdivisions and so on) are governed by statutory authorities other than the Board. They are processed as received from the municipal authority, district forester, postmaster, station agent or township clerk concerned. When consulted on questions of nomenclature accuracy relative to location, orthography, language or name origin, the Board can only function in the capacity of an advisory body. The important distinction to be made here is that the implementation of such a policy is ultimately conditioned by information indicating that a given name is either the result of purely local or - at least - regional generation or that it is the consequence of decisions handed down arbitrarily by statutory authority.

XI. CONCLUSIONS

In summing up, it would be useful to outline the two arguments central to present nomenclature policy of the Ontario Board. These are as follows:

(a) In cases where a person or group is directly responsible for a given feature's existence in the landscape and therefore its configuration on topographical maps, that person or group has the right to name that feature (or place). The Ontario Board acts only as official recorder of the submitted name and assists in the implementation of the necessary recommendatory steps for its approval. Exceptions to this procedure are made in cases where problems of duplication, orthography, propriety, language, etc. arise. In such situations the presence of any of the aforementioned factors dictate that the Board's recommendations be respected. Failing this, the onus is on the Board to inform and direct the person or persons concerned - if in fact such a move can be made in time;

(b) In cases where a name of a natural feature, such as a river, burn, island, peninsula, bay, hill, lake, etc., or, alternatively, a name of a former natural feature is determined to be the one most used by the majority of persons inhabiting the area proximate to the feature - or the site of a former feature - the Board shall record, and, providing none of the above problems materialize, process the name as given, including Cree and Ojibwa forms which are transliterated as accurately as possible into English. As a classic example of a former natural feature name in current official usage, "The Burnt Lands" near Arnprior, Ontario, is a case in point; for the area has long since been reforested. The name, in fact, has survived the feature. For all that, it remains a valid toponym - or choronym - independent of the fact that the original feature itself has vanished.

The exceptions which apply to argument (a) apply equally to (b) for both arguments relate to categories of geographical nomenclature considered to be fully within the provincial board's authorized policy field. The nomenclature data so recorded is: (a) compiled, collated and processed by the Board staff; (b) formally approved by the Minister of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (formerly Department of Lands and Forests); and, (c) formally submitted for adoption as

toponyms destined for official use on Canadian maps. This latter stage involves the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names and the Toponymy Division of the Federal Department of Energy, Mines and Resources which assumes responsibility for publishing the nation's topographical maps.

XII. RECOMMENDATIONS

As a consequence of the conclusions derived from this study, it is recommended:

(1) That the approval and adoption of all geographical names of natural and man-made features generated by local usage be regarded as the exclusive responsibility of the same statutory nomenclature authority responsible for their recording and compilation;

(2) That the naming of features whose existence and configuration on topographical maps is the consequence of human activity be regarded as the prerogative of the person or persons accredited with being chiefly responsible for the introduction of that feature into the landscape;

(3) That geographical features be classified and toponymic jurisdictional boundaries be designated in accordance with the definition of geographical entities as either being predominantly the result of natural or man-made processes;

(4) That the adoption of names of such geographical entities as unincorporated communities (villages, hamlets, farmsteads and so on), area and locality names (usually in-use choronyms of former features and former communities) be regarded as being as much within a nomenclature authority's policy field as names of natural geographical or topographical features;

(5) That it be recognized that the cartographic transfer of a natural geographical feature from within the boundaries of a township, county or district to that of a municipality in no way alters the status of its name or relationship with the provincial toponymic authority.
