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**Place Naming Conventions in the Australian Capital Territory:  
Canberra - Australia's National Capital**

Submitted by Australia\*\*

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# Place Naming Conventions in the Australian Capital Territory:

## *Canberra* - Australia's National Capital

Submitted by Australia



### **Introduction**

This paper has been written to explain how place naming is undertaken in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Canberra, the national capital of Australia. Canberra has a unique naming system, which dates back to its inception and provides an insight into Australia's history, and things held dear in the hearts of Australians.

The Minister for Planning in the ACT Legislative Assembly, has the authority to name any unleased Territory land under the *Public Place Names Act 1989*. The Minister delegates this role to the Chief Planning Executive of the ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA). The ACT's Legislative Assembly has responsibilities at both the levels of a State Government and those of a local council. This means that the Minister for Planning, in addition to broader planning responsibilities, is also responsible for street, suburb and public place names, as well as geographical names.

The legislative requirements, research, and data processing and maintenance associated with the naming of places is undertaken by the ACT Place Names Officer, under the direction of the ACT's Chief Surveyor.

The ACT Place Names Officer maintains a database of all place names in the ACT and researches new names for commemoration in place names. Each name is notified in the ACT Legislation Register and tabled in the ACT Legislative Assembly as a disallowable instrument (which means the Legislative Assembly members may disallow the instrument should they not agree with the suggested names).

## History

Located on the ancient lands of the Indigenous Ngunnawal people, Canberra's name is thought to mean 'meeting place', derived from the Aboriginal name *Kamberra*. European settlers first came to the district in the 1830s, and the area was chosen for the site of the federal capital of Australia in 1908.

Canberra's special contrast of nature and urban living was planned in 1912 by Canberra's master designer, Walter Burley Griffin, a Chicago architect who won an international competition for the design of Australia's capital city. The Provisional Parliament House was opened in 1927, in what was then a treeless paddock.



The importance the Australian Government ascribes to place names is no more apparent than in the planning of Canberra. Conventions for Canberra's nomenclature were considered, and guidelines were made, at the city's first planning conference in 1913.

It was decided at that conference, that each place name would not only provide a distinct identifier to residents of Canberra, it would also commemorate names characteristic of Australia and Australian's who have contributed to the nation.



The inaugural planning committee felt that patriotic and national sentiment would best be met if the names of those 'men' who had contributed most to Australia's existence as a unified nation, were used in the most important places, that is, for the names of divisions and suburbs.

While Indigenous and local (European) names featured in early divisions alongside the 'fathers' of our Nation, no division was named after a woman until the 1970s.

It was also decided that various classes of names should be grouped together, consistent with a *theme* for the naming of streets in each division.

Canberra now boasts over 100 divisions; their themes are wide and varied, covering all aspects of Australian history and endeavour, from Australia's Indigenous peoples and early explorers, to scientists, inventors and sporting stars.

Looking at the names commemorated over time reveals things that were important at the time the naming occurred. For instance, the first names gazetted in 1928 mainly comprise the founders of the Federation of Australia and our explorers, Aboriginal heritage and the generals and soldiers distinguished themselves in the Boer and First World War. During the 1940s, the generals and soldiers of the Second World War were commemorated. The 1950s and 1960s saw an increase in the number of places named after Prime Ministers, politicians and government officials. The 1970s, as mentioned before, saw women being commemorated for the first time and an increase in Aboriginal naming.

### **Commemorating Canberrans**

In June 2007, Mr. Jon Stanhope MLA, ACT Chief Minister, introduced a new initiative to name suburbs, streets and parks after Canberrans who have made a significant contribution to the community. Peak bodies, universities, sporting organisations, local historians and the Canberra community have been asked to come forward with their nominations.

Over the last 95 years Canberra has developed its own impressive history and this will be featured along side the national history in the naming of Canberra's streets and public places.

### **General Practices**

The following guidelines are adhered to when naming a place in the ACT.

1. Street names are recommended to the Minister for Planning according to the theme assigned to the suburb in which they are to be located.
2. Only the names of deceased persons are included in the nomenclature of public places in the ACT. Generally, a person must have been dead for at least a year before commemoration can be considered;
3. Before commemorating a person, consideration should be given to their prominence in their specific field. If there are too many names suitable and appropriate for a particular theme, the names are listed in order of prominence and are commemorated in that order.
4. The name of a person considered to have attained exceptional prominence or standing may be reserved for a major road or thoroughfare.

5. Consideration may be given to the use of both the given name and the surname of a person where:
  - the road is a major thoroughfare or arterial road and/or;
  - a person of the same surname has already been commemorated, and the person is considered to be particularly prominent in his or her field; and/or
  - no other name is available for use.
6. Duplication of names is avoided.
7. Generally, long names are not given to short streets (for cartographic reasons).
8. A name must not lead to confusion or difficulty of any kind.
9. Names that are likely to give offence are avoided.

### **Commemoration and Education**

The ACT's method of choosing names for streets in each of its divisions has resulted in a unique grouping of particular Australian historical information. This has developed into an interesting teaching and research resource for those enquiring into the history of Australia.

Canberra's students often contact the Place Names Officer for assistance while researching projects set by their teachers. These requests take many forms - for instance:

- the origin of their street's name;
- the whereabouts of Australia's dams, rivers, mines and mountains;
- who were Australia's notable scientists, scholars, sports men and women.

This information is in our streets and suburbs. Each gazettal of a name contains a short explanatory statement about its significance.

### **Nominations for commemoration**

The nominations of candidates for commemoration come from a variety of sources. People may write to suggest that a family member or friend be considered, or organisations may ask that consideration be given to highly respected members. Published obituaries are closely watched and placed in category files, to be drawn on when needed. When a theme is allocated by the Minister for Planning, a list of suitable names is compiled by the ACT Place Names Officer and entered into the ACT's nomenclature database, which has three parts:

- commemorated names;
- name to be commemorated; and
- the *ACT Gazetteer* (which contains all names, including geographic names).

## The Naming Process

The Division name is gazetted and a theme for the Division allocated by the minister, subject to the advice of the ACT Place names Committee.

One hundred appropriate names are researched to match the theme and are entered into "to be commemorated" section of the nomenclature database.

Street names are selected for consideration by the Minister for Planning either from the stored names in the nomenclature database or from further research directed by the Government.

Clearances to use the names are obtained from families, the Place Names Committee and the ACT Planning Executive.

A naming instrument (which is a disallowable instrument) and its explanatory statement are notified on the online ACT Legislation Register and tabled in the ACT Legislative Assembly within 6 sitting days. After this period has expired the notified names are deemed to be law and can only be amended or revoked by the ACT Legislative Assembly. The ACT Legislation Register can be viewed at: <http://www.legislation.act.gov.au>.

After the names are notified, the ACT Cadastre (the ACT's register of land information) is updated and all interested parties notified.

## Legislation

Prior to the ACT's gaining self-government in 1989, place naming was undertaken by the Commonwealth Government of Australia under the *National Memorials Ordinance 1928*.

After self-government, the ACT became responsible for all *Territory land* (see *Territory Plan*, <http://www.actpla.act.gov.au/>). Place naming is administered under the *Public Place Names Act 1989*. This Act does not require an over-sighting place naming committee, but the Minister for Planning has appointed an ACT Place Names Committee to provide advice on matters relating to place names.

The Commonwealth Government has retained responsibility for all *National land*, (see *National Capital Plan* <http://www.nationalcapital.gov.au/>). The *National Memorials Ordinance 1928* remains in force for *National land*.

## ACT Place Names on the WEB

The ACT Planning and Land Authority's (the Government authority under which ACT Place Names sits) website contains a section devoted to place names. This includes

- a place name's search for origin and meaning of all street and suburb names;
- place naming processes and procedures; and
- street addressing.

The website can be viewed at:

[http://www.actpla.act.gov.au/tools\\_resources/maps\\_land\\_survey](http://www.actpla.act.gov.au/tools_resources/maps_land_survey).

Enhancements to this website are currently being undertaken. By using the ACTPLA's ACTMAPi, which is a web-based tool for viewing maps and geographic information about Canberra and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) a capability is being developed that will make it possible to search for information on all Canberra's feature names, be they geographic, suburb, street or building names. The information retrieved will include its location in map form, aerial photography and satellite imagery, as well as the history and origin of the name. A wide variety of searches can be performed. For example:

- how many women have been commemorated in the field of, say, medicine or law and who they were and why they were considered important;
- information about places using a 'keyword' search.
- if a person is looking for an apartment block and only has the apartment block's name and no address, this website will enable them to locate the address (and provide a location map & aerial photograph of the place).
- the website will allow research to be undertaken across a number of areas and will provide an ideal opportunity for school projects to be developed by teachers using the information available, direct from the internet to the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

Canberra's place naming practices have ensured that each name provides a unique address for the residents of Canberra as well as containing a wealth of information about Australia's heritage, its notable people, places and achievements.