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FIELD PROCEDURES FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF
NATIVE AMERICAN PLACENAMES: UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Prepared by Donald J. Orth, U.S. Geological Survey

INTRODUCTION

The placenames of Native Americans are an important and integral part of the cultural heritage of the United States. These names are preserved mainly in the oral traditions of Native Americans living on reservations and in Native communities. Field investigation is a critical link between the locally spoken name and the official written form shown on Federal maps and publications.

The purpose of the field effort is to record local placenames and their applications as accurately as possible for subsequent analysis and treatment by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. The collected field information is used to select the best written forms of these names in standard Roman alphabet for use on all Federal maps and publications.

PRELIMINARY STEPS

A review of background information about the culture, history, and language of the Native Americans who will be interviewed and the geography of the area in which they live is helpful. It is standard procedure to request permission to conduct a toponymic field investigation from the appropriate tribal council and community leaders. Since the investigation of names information is often incidental to other primary duties, the Executive Secretary for Domestic Names, Board on Geographic Names, may be able to assist in obtaining this permission.

In general, the field investigator should respect and honor the wishes of community leaders and the people interviewed. Photographs of persons and religious places should not be taken without specific permission. The community should be kept informed of the progress of the names work, which may be done through the representative appointed by the community leaders to work with the investigator. It should be agreed whether the Native government or the community will be furnished copies of the field maps and reports after completion of the names investigation.

TRIBAL REPRESENTATIVE

Upon arrival on the reservation or in the Native area where the field work will be done, the person designated by the tribal council to be their representative should be contacted. The representative usually can speak both English and the native language fluently and is knowledgeable about the local people, customs, protocol, and geography of the area. In some cases, the representative may be an expert on local placenames. In addition to providing information about the local area, the representative may be able to:

Initiate contacts with potential informants and provide appropriate introductions,

Assist in interviewing and interpreting information,

Provide translation services,

Keep local people and officials informed of the names work, and

Provide office space for the period of investigation.

FIELD INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

Because of the high cost involved in field investigation, the selection and number of people to be interviewed are important so that repeat visits are not necessary. The selection of informants must be undertaken with the aid of the local representative or, if such a person is not available, in cooperation with the tribal chairman or another representative of the community.

Personal interviewing requires courtesy, tact, and respect for differing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. The presence of the local representative at an interview helps to reduce any potential problems based on personalities or on an informant's lack of knowledge about the local use of geographic names. The field investigator should state clearly in the beginning that the purpose of the interview is to learn how each informant refers to the geographical entities within the area in which he or she is most familiar.

Care must be taken to ensure that an informant is not influenced by map usage. Local, spoken names are sometimes considered to be trivial and unimportant when compared to

published names.

The field investigator should be objective, should not lead an informant when asking questions, and should not make assumptions on the basis of prior information received from other interviews.

Although the primary goal should be the investigation of Native American placenames, all names used by the people in a Native community should be reported regardless of language of origin. Non-Native names may be important when evaluating the selection of names for Federal maps and other publications. In cases where more than one name is applied to the same feature, the field investigator should try to determine the priority and whether one name is used over the other when speaking a particular language or when speaking to a non-Native person.

USE OF TAPE RECORDER

The tape recorder is particularly useful for the collection of toponymic information derived from Native American languages. Its use during field investigations provides:

1. An excellent method of checking and analyzing data that could not be fully recorded by hand in the field,
2. An audio record of actual speech sounds that language experts may use for accurate name analysis, annotation, and transcription, and

3. A permanent record that others can use to reevaluate toponymic information.

Tape recording a conversation with every contact or informant is not necessary, and in some cases, may not be suitable. An informant's permission should be requested before taping an interview.

LANGUAGES

Languages encountered may or may not have a recognized written form. For those that do, the names are recorded in the standard script developed for the language from which the names are derived. It will be useful if the informant or the local representative can provide a written form. If the language does not have an established written form, the names collected should be tape recorded, if permissible, and written as carefully as possible using phonetic notation.

NAME MEANING

The meaning of all names should be recorded if possible, and all versions of name meaning should be recorded exactly as given. Some informants may explain why a name is used to refer to a particular place or feature, instead of explaining the meaning of the name. For example, a name may be said to mean "turning place," which is an explanation of the name that is best translated as "change paddle side." Both kinds of meaning or explanations are important for name analysis. Not all placenames have recognizable

meanings. Some names may be very old and the meaning unknown by current users. Borrowed names from other languages often have unknown meanings and are labels with only reference value.

NAME APPLICATION

An understanding of the association between the names and the geographic entities they identify is important. That association includes such things as the place, type of feature, area, and other pertinent information that will help relate the feature to its name.

In general, the more distinctive a place, the more likely it is to be named. Often, however, minor features will be named, but major features, such as mountain ranges, will be unnamed or vague. Visually indistinct places may have names that have religious or other associations.

A field investigator must determine and identify the local applications of names and, just as important, report when local usage is either strong or weak. Such information is important to the Board on Geographic Names when deciding on the application of an approved name.

U.S. Board on Geographic Names
NATIVE AMERICAN PLACENAMES
Report Form - 1988

FEATURE LOCATION: State _____ County _____

USGS Map Name _____ Annotated Map Attached yes no

Feature Description & Application _____

Designator _____ Feature Code _____

FEATURE NAME: Tape Code _____ No Tape Record

Notebook Number _____ Info. on Attached Map yes no

Name(s) in Native Script _____

Source Language of Name _____

Transcribed Name(s) _____ No Official Script

Name Meaning _____

Non Native Name(s) _____ source _____
source _____

NAME SOURCE(S): Publication Reference _____

Informant #1 _____ Notebook Page No. _____
Informant #2 _____ Notebook Page No. _____
Informant #3 _____ Notebook Page No. _____
Informant #4 _____ Notebook Page No. _____

FIELDWORKER/TEAM: Interview Date _____
Name _____ Agency/Organization _____
Name _____

REPORT FORMS AND SAMPLE QUESTIONS

The Domestic Geographic Name Native American Placenames Report form should be completed. The following questions may be used as guides during an interview and are to emphasize the need for additional or slightly different information during the collection of Native American placename information. Answers should be recorded on the form under the most appropriate heading. When space is not sufficient, a blank page or additional form sheet may be attached to the form and cross-referenced to the appropriate heading.

1. Are there other names applied to the feature, and can you tell me about each name?
2. What is the meaning of each name?
3. Do you know why the feature was given the name and when?
4. Are there precise limits to the application of the name?
5. Is there a relationship between the name or feature and surrounding names and features?
6. What is the nature of the feature, that is, is it sacred, does it reflect a significant event, etc.?

7. From whom did you learn of the name?

8. Are there stories or legends connected with the name?

Tact and imagination should be used to obtain as much information as possible on the origin and meaning of Native American placenames. The investigator also should be observant of the surroundings to determine possible associations such as camp site, hunting or fishing place, historical event, or place of religious significance.

Equally important is an understanding of the association between the names and the geographic entities they identify. That association includes the location of the place, feature, or area to which each name applies, a description of the nature and extent of each named feature and, when applicable, an explanation of the hierarchical relationship between associated entities.

The field investigator should attempt to learn exactly what is named and to what the name applies. An informant should be asked to explain how people in his or her community use each name and to describe exactly what kind of place the name identifies.

SUBMITTAL OF INFORMATION

Upon completion of a field investigation project, the field investigator submits a report that identifies the tribal representative, persons interviewed, and agreements, along with

appropriate information on the project and particular problems concerning specific names. Name report forms, annotated maps, and recorder tapes (if any) are reviewed for completeness and accuracy. All material is then transferred through the field investigator's own agency for eventual transmittal to the Board, or directly to the Executive Secretary for Domestic Geographic Names, U.S. Board on Geographic Names, U.S. Geological Survey, National Center 523, Reston, Virginia 22092.

DRAFT POLICY

**NAMES OF
NATIVE
AMERICAN
ORIGIN**

The geographic names of the Native Americans are an important and integral part of the cultural heritage of the United States. The Board on Geographic Names has traditionally supported and promoted the official use of names derived from the Indian and Inuit (Eskimo) languages.

Policy sec.1

Changing Established Native American Names: The written forms and applications of established official names of Native American origin are to be retained without change. Proposals to change such names will be decided according to routine decision criteria.

sec. 2

Changing Established Non-Native Names for Major Features in a Reservation: Well-established and widely known non-Native names within or on the boundary of a reservation will not be considered for change unless the request for such a change has strong support throughout the State and is approved by the State names authority, or lacking a State names authority, the State legislature.

sec. 3

Changing Established Non-Native Names of Minor Features in a Reservation: Proposals by the tribal government to change the names of minor features within a reservation will be considered by the board.

Guidelines

The Board allows the use of an unofficial non-Native or Native American name in parentheses after the official name.

A name of Native American origin normally should be submitted using a non-Native generic element common to the area.

New names should be spelled according to the general orthography adopted by the Board for Native American placenames or the orthography adopted for the spelling of names in a specific language.

SUMMARY

The placenames of Native Americans are an important and integral part of the cultural heritage of the United States. These names are preserved mainly in the oral traditions of Native Americans living on reservations and in Native communities. Field investigation is a critical link between the locally spoken name and the official written form shown on Federal maps and publications.

This is an abbreviated version of field instructions being prepared by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names in cooperation with Federal agencies and State names authorities. Those who wish to obtain a copy of the field instructions when completed should write expressing their interest to:

Donald J. Orth
Executive Secretary
Domestic Geographic Names
U.S. Board on Geographic Names
U.S. Geological Survey
National Center 523
Reston, Virginia 22092