

**Item 20 of the Provisional Agenda**

**Other toponymic issues**

**ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF PLACE NAME MANAGEMENT IN QUEBEC \***

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# ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF PLACE NAME MANAGEMENT IN QUEBEC

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## **Abstract**

In 2012, Quebec will mark 100 years of official toponym management. This Canadian province formed a geographical names agency (Commission de géographie) in 1912 to catalogue, standardize and preserve the province's place names. In this paper, we will attempt to paint a portrait of the path the agency has taken over the years. We will look at the context in 1912 when the Commission was created, some important milestones and people in the history of the Commission, its transformation into the Commission de toponymie in 1977, and its close relationship with the Charter of the French Language. We will then discuss the Commission de toponymie today, as well as the main activities scheduled to mark the Commission's 100th anniversary in 2012.

## Introduction

In 2012, Quebec will celebrate 100 years of managing place names on its territory. As one of the oldest geographical names authorities in Canada, the Commission de toponymie has a long and rich history. Although its mandate, objectives and even its name may have evolved over the years, it has remained faithful to its primary mission: to catalogue, standardize and preserve place names. A number of activities and publications are planned in celebration of this occasion.

## Historical portrait

### Before the current Commission de toponymie

In the late 19th century, Quebec public servant Eugène Rouillard was assigned the task of dealing with issues pertaining to geographical names in the province. He was also appointed to represent the province on the Geographic Board of Canada, a federal body set up in 1897.

In the early 20th century, new territory—primarily in Abitibi and Haute-Mauricie—was being explored and surveyed. The exploration missions identified new place names and revealed the need for new toponymic references. In addition, the proportion and quality of the French on geographic plans and maps of the Quebec territory became a major cause for concern.

As a result, the First Congress on the French Language in Canada, held in the city of Québec in 1912, recommended that an organization be formed to manage geographical place names. The Commission géographique de la Province de Québec was subsequently set up on November 15, 1912, with Eugène Rouillard, who had already been looking after Quebec toponymy for a decade, as its first chairman.

The primary mandates of the new agency were to catalogue and standardize Quebec place names and ensure they were preserved. The Commission géographique was specifically responsible for determining new geographical names, changing existing names, establishing the spelling of names so as to standardize the writing of toponyms on maps, and setting the rules for spelling. Decisions made by the Commission were all submitted to the Minister of Lands and Forests for approval.

The Commission géographique de la Province de Québec held its first meeting on December 5, 1912, at which the name **L'Anse-à-Beaufils**, a hamlet near Percé in the Gaspésie region, was officialized, and the name **Lac Sloath** in Témiscouata was changed to **Lac Légaré**. One hundred years later these two names are still the official names in use.

In 1920, the Commission géographique de la Province de Québec was replaced by the Commission de géographie. The powers of the new agency remained the same. Isaïe Nantais was appointed secretary in 1941.

The Commission de géographie did not meet between 1939 and 1962. Although no toponyms, other than the names of the townships, were officialized during that period, a significant amount

of work was accomplished, including historical research, recording of information, and the control and validation of place names.

The Commission de géographie was re-formed in 1962 with the appointment of seven board members. This resumption of activities led to a large number of names that had been documented during the Nantais years being formalized and the publication in 1969 of the *Répertoire géographique du Québec*, which contains 45,000 place names. In 1962, the Commission de géographie also started participating in activities organized by the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, which subsequently became the Geographical Names Board of Canada. The Commission de géographie also started attending sessions held by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) at the same time, while the Commission's new secretary Jean Poirier attended the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, in 1967, as well as the two subsequent conferences.

### **Adoption of the Charter of the French Language**

With the adoption of the Charter of the French Language on August 26, 1977, the Commission de géographie was replaced by the Commission de toponymie. Its powers were expanded and its jurisdiction specified. Henri Dorion, a geographer and toponymist, became the president of the new agency.

The Charter of the French Language stipulates that the Commission de toponymie is charged with proposing the standards and rules of spelling applicable to place names to the Government, cataloguing and preserving place names, establishing and standardizing geographical terminology in cooperation with the Office de la langue française, officializing place names, publishing the official geographical nomenclature of Quebec, and advising the Government on toponymy-related questions the Government submits to the Commission. The Commission may also inform the Government and other public agencies of its opinion on toponymy-related matters, name or change the names of geographical places in unorganized territories, and, with the consent of a public agency with joint jurisdiction over a place name, name or change the name of any place on local municipal territory.

In 1979, an extensive ononymic inventory and standardization project was launched with a view to incorporating all traffic route names into the official corpus of toponyms. This resulted in the Commission working in close cooperation with the various municipal administrations. In 1988, the Commission started working on computerizing toponymic processing, and the entire official corpus of Quebec toponyms became available on-line in 1998.

In addition to current toponym management activities, the Commission de toponymie is active internationally, participating in UNGEGN activities as well as various toponymy training programs. In 1987, the year that marked the 75th anniversary of the Commission, the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names was held in Montréal, and the Sixteenth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences took place in the city of Québec. The French-speaking Division of UNGEGN formed in 1998 helped strengthen cooperation between France and Quebec toponymic authorities. This collaboration led to, among other things, the launch of a website of French-language toponymy, which includes a database of French-language exonyms and an introductory course on toponymy.

Many more major works have also been published, starting with the *Répertoire toponymique du Québec* and the *Guide toponymique du Québec*, in 1979. Other guides as well as toponym itineraries were also published in subsequent years. In 1994, the Commission published the dictionary of Quebec toponyms *Noms et lieux du Québec*, an outstanding work that has become an indispensable reference in the field of Quebec toponymic heritage. A new expanded version was published in 2006. The superb book *La France et le Québec* was published in 1999 jointly by the Commission de toponymie du Québec and the Commission nationale de toponymie de France.

### **The Commission de toponymie today**

Although the Commission de toponymie became administratively attached to the Office québécois de la langue française early in the 21st century, it remains an independent government agency. This proximity, however, has made it more efficient for the Commission to carry out its mission to preserve the quality of the French language in Quebec toponyms.

The Commission is in fact required to promote the primarily French face of Quebec today, while harmoniously incorporating the toponyms of other linguistic groups in the province. Toponyms are an expression of cultural heritage that are at increasing risk of being lost if they are not catalogued as quickly as possible. This urgency to press onward is one of the challenges facing the Commission today, in that the cultural heritage dimension of toponymy has become an imperative in the past two decades. The modernization of mapping systems and increasingly universal access to geographical information has made the task both easier and more complex in the sense that although the sources of information have multiplied, so have the various toponymic forms for many place names.

On the eve of its 100th anniversary, the Commission de toponymie has formalized more than 124,000 Quebec place names, 232,000 including odonyms.

### **Program of celebrations**

#### **Planned activities**

Although the program for the 2012 celebrations has not yet been finalized, many activities, publications and papers have already been included on the agenda, locally, nationally and internationally.

The Commission de toponymie has devised a catchy slogan, *Le nom de lieu, signature du temps et de l'espace*, which focuses on the link between place names and geography and history. The slogan will be incorporated into the agency's institutional signature, along with a graphic element depicting the Commission's 100th anniversary in 2012.

Papers are planned for the Twenty-sixth Session of UNGEGN in May 2011, as well as for the Twenty-fourth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in September 2011. The focus of these papers will be to inform the international toponymic community about the Commission's history and the activities planned for the 2012 celebrations.

Quebec will be hosting the annual meeting of the Geographical Names Board of Canada in the fall 2012. A seminar on the theme of Toponymy and Sustainable Development is also planned. These two events will provide toponymy specialists from Canada and abroad with an opportunity to explore how toponymy has contributed and will contribute in future to the protection and sharing of our collective cultural heritage.

Locally, a motion will be brought before the Quebec National Assembly marking the 100 years of toponym management by the Quebec government. The Commission's website will become the public's go-to source for information on its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A souvenir publication on the Commission is also being developed. It will cover the agency's history and provide a chronological list of the main events, commemorations and publications associated with Quebec toponymy.

### *Parlers et paysages du Québec*

The major project to be undertaken by the Commission de toponymie on the occasion of its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary focuses on toponymy as cultural heritage. A work tentatively entitled *Parlers et paysages du Québec* will be published jointly with the Office québécois de la langue française. The purpose of this general publication is to highlight some of the vernacular geographical terms in Quebec toponymy.

The publication will contain dozens of words specific to the vernacular language of Quebec. The terms will each be analyzed from both a linguistic standpoint and a toponymic perspective using a specified "host-toponym." Information on the origins and meaning of each of the toponyms will be provided. The location and other geographic features associated with the place names will also be presented.

*Parlers et paysages du Québec* will be in the form of a travel journal. This innovative approach will allow for a harmonious blend of scientific content and more literary and artistic components. The visuals will parallel this approach, blending photographs, drawings and maps. Personal information such as people's thoughts, anecdotes and legends associated with the toponyms, or comments on the scientific content will complete the presentation.

The content and form are designed to produce a reader-friendly, easily accessible publication. The reader-traveller will become aware of toponymy's key role in the preservation of cultural heritage while taking delight in a non-traditional approach to the discovery of words and places.

## **Conclusion**

In 1912, Quebec set up an agency to manage place names on its territory. One hundred years later that agency is more vibrant than ever before. The Commission de toponymie retains the same responsibilities it was assigned in 1912; meanwhile other powers have been added, and its activities and expertise have expanded significantly. With countless publications and projects produced locally, nationally and internationally to its credit, the Commission is prepared to meet the inherent challenges of toponymy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The year 2012 will mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the agency, and a variety of activities and publications are planned to commemorate this historical event. The Commission de toponymie plans to take this opportunity to make toponym experts and enthusiasts from around the world aware of its activities. It hopes to attract a large number of them to Quebec in 2012.

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