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NATIONAL STANDARDIZATION

TOPONYMIC GUIDELINES FOR MAP AND OTHER EDITORS

Toponymic guidelines for map editors and other editors

Paper submitted by the United States of America\*\*

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#### SUMMARY

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names is a national authority established by law to provide uniform geographical-name usage throughout the Federal Government. Working closely with Federal agencies and State geographical names authorities, it has developed specific principles, policies, and procedures governing the choice, spelling, form, and application of domestic geographical names.

The geographical names of the United States are derived from many languages. The majority of these names, however, are closely associated with the English language. Official names are normally based on names found in current local usage.

The Board provides guidelines for determining official names, the capitalization of names, acceptable variation of written forms, abbreviations, and the use of diacritical and other marks. There is a short description of the nature of geographical names found in the United States.

#### GUIDELINES

1. Introduction

The names of places, features, and areas in the United States of America are derived from many languages. The majority of these names, however, are closely associated with the English language. The national authority for determining official names is the U.S. Board on Geographic Names.

2. Language

Although a few States have passed laws supporting English as the primary language for official State business, the United States does not have an official national language. It is a society, however, that is essentially unilingual in that English is spoken by all except a very small minority of its citizens and it is the language used for most public purposes. Languages such as French, Spanish, Polynesian, and those of the American Indian and Inuit are spoken, along with English, in areas occupied by people that have preserved their ethnic traditions. English is used in its standard written form consisting of an alphabet of 26 letters conforming to that found in the United Kingdom.

The majority of geographical names in the United States can trace their origins to the English language. However, English is an adoptive language and most areas of the country have some names derived from other languages. Some areas have a high percentage of names that have their origins in the Spanish, French, Dutch, Polynesian, Inuit and other native American languages that are currently used in spoken and written English.

### 3. National Geographical-Names Authority

#### 3.1 Organization and Authority

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names is a Federal body created in 1890 and was established in its present form by Public Law in 1947. The Board comprises representatives from several Federal agencies who are appointed for 2-year terms. It is authorized to establish and maintain uniform geographic name usage throughout the Federal Government. Sharing its responsibilities with the Secretary of the Interior, the Board has developed principles, policies, and procedures governing the use of both domestic and foreign geographic names as well as underseas and extraterrestrial feature names. Work is accomplished by two principal committees, the Foreign Names Committee and the Domestic Names Committee. Although established to serve the Federal Government as a central authority to which all name problems, name inquiries, and new name proposals can be directed, the Board also plays a similar role for the general public.

#### 3.2 Domestic Names Committee

The Domestic Names Committee is responsible for standardizing domestic geographical names of places and features within the 50 States and within other areas under the sovereignty of the United States. The Executive Secretary and staff support for the domestic-names activities of the Board are provided by the U.S. Geological Survey.

#### 3.3 Principles, Policies, and Procedures for Domestic Standardization

The principle that guides domestic-names policy is formal recognition of present-day local usage. The Board works closely with State geographical committees or advisors, State and local governments, and the general public in order to determine choice, spelling, written form, and application of names for official Federal use. The Board realizes that geographic names represent a significant part of local heritage and each State and its citizens have certain proprietary rights and an inherent interest in their own names. If there is confusing duplication or if local names are derogatory to persons, races, or religions, the Board may disapprove those names and seek alternatives. Also, if local name use conflicts with other names or appears weak, well-established documented names and names with historical significance are given strong consideration. The Board does not approve new domestic geographical names that honor or may be construed to honor living persons.

Another principle applied by the Board on Geographic Names since 1890 is that official domestic geographical names are written in the Roman alphabet as normally used for writing the English language. Diacritical marks, however, may be added to names based on the Spanish and French languages. Other written forms may be placed in parentheses after the official written name.

The Board identifies one name, one spelling, and application as official for a geographical entity in the United States, its territories, and outlying areas. An exception to this principle occurs in the names of polities (political subdivisions) where a long-form legal name applies to the political organization of an area and a short-form name is used for the geographical entity contained within the bounds of the political organization (See 6.6).

The Board normally accepts as official the names of polities, bounded areas of administration, structures, and establishments in the United States as determined by the appropriate responsible public or private authorities.

While its principles of national standardization apply to all geographical name situations, the Board's policies deal with particular name problems or treatment. These policies are published in a document titled Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names. In general, they deal with names being considered by the U.S. Congress, name changes, commemorative names, naming in parks and wilderness areas, scientific naming needs, derogatory names, use of diacritical marks, name duplication, variant/alternate geographical names and parenthetical usage, and long names. Board procedures are instructions/guidelines for map and other editors and for submitting name conflicts or new names to the Board for consideration.

#### 3.4 Determination of Official Names

By definition, an official domestic geographical name is one in which the written form of a name and its application are approved by the Board on Geographic Names for use throughout the Federal Government. The procedures for determining official names are carefully outlined by the Board. A geographical name is determined to be official either by formal decision or by policy. A decision is a formal act by the Board to make a particular name, its spelling, form, and application official for Federal use. This occurs after a Board review of case information developed through in-depth investigation. Board decisions on domestic names are then published in official reports.

A name and its application may be made official by policy if it falls within one of the following categories:

- a. It is included and designated official in the National Geographic Names Data Base, a part of the computer-based geographic Names Information System (GNIS). Names in GNIS are formally published in the National Gazetteer of the United States of America.
- b. It has been established by an Act of Congress.
- c. It has been established by the administrative authority of a Federal, State, or local government organization.

3.5 Spelling of Geographical Names

When determining the spelling of names in the United States, the Board recognizes that geographical names, like other proper names, may not normally be subject to the general spelling rules which apply to other words in the English language. Standard spellings of geographic names are established for use by the Federal Government. Although these standard spellings generally conform to rules of English, they are those commonly used or preferred by local citizens and may therefore include grammatically incorrect, misspelled, and clipped words, and words or other proper names combined in various ways.

3.6 Capitalization of Geographical Names

Capitalization is indicated by the standard spelling of each name as established by the Board. With few exceptions, all words considered part of a proper geographical name are capitalized, including all adjectives, common nouns, and the definite article.

Adams Apple	Little Captain Island
Alva B. Adams Tunnel	Los Caños
Big Hill	Old Fundamental Church
Big Hill Basin	Pee Dee Ditch
Cuchilla Buena Vista	The Crooked Esses
Dark Hollow Brook	The Hogback
Farm River Gut	Upper Sulphur Creek
Lac Arnois	West Side Pond

Exceptions to the rule of capitalization include articles and prepositions in multiple-word complex names.

Alto de la Cruz	Posta de Roque
Canada de Ojo del Agua	Red River of the North
Fond du Lac	Rock of Ages
Gap in Knob	Scarce of Fat Ridge
Lake of the Ozarks	Spread Eagle Chain of Lakes

When the generic part of a name is purposely omitted, as in "the Potomac," "the Mojave," and "the Atlantic," the definite article preceding the specific name is not capitalized. Proper names of geographical entities such as regions, political divisions, populated places, localities, and physical features are capitalized in both the singular and plural.

Allegheny Front	High Plains
Atlantic Coastal Plain	Isle of Pines
Bighorn Basin	Middle Atlantic States
Blue Ridge	Monarch Geyser
Catahoula Parish	Mount Rainier
Colorado Plateau	Niagara Falls
Dennison Township	Pine Ridge Reservation
Eastern Shore	San Joaquin Valley
Fall Line	Skyline Drive
Front Range	The Chute
Great Lakes	Tidal Basin
Gulf Coast	Upper Peninsula
Half Dome	Washington Metropolitan Area

Qualifying words used in a general sense for parts of named areas are not capitalized. Care is taken to prevent misunderstanding; for example, "western Virginia" or "the western part of Virginia" is preferable to "west Virginia," which may be confused with the State called West Virginia. There are, however, borderline cases in which local residents and news media consistently use a qualifying word to modify the meaning of an existing geographic name in order to refer to a part of a State or other area. The modifying word then may become part of the proper name, and is uniformly capitalized with the rest of the name.

East Tennessee	South Mississippi
Greater New York (City)	South Pacific (Ocean)
North Atlantic (Ocean)	Upstate New York

### 3.7 Writing Marks in Geographical Names

Writing marks or printing marks such as hyphens and apostrophes are occasionally used in official domestic geographical names although there is a tendency to omit them whenever possible. Usage varies. "Hole in the Wall" in one place may be spelled "Hole-in-the-Wall" in another. Well-established locally written forms are normally accepted for official use. Hyphens are sometimes used in names consisting of a phrase (Go-to-it Creek), in Indian names (Be-Cha-Tu-Da Draw), and in names having a dual-name specific (Clark-Mallard Ditch).

The Board does not approve use of the genitive apostrophe within the body of a geographical name. The word or words that form a geographical or proper name are considered to have changed function and thereby become a single denotative unit.

Thus, names are written Saint Marys and Peters, not "Saint Mary's" and "Peters'"; Jamestown instead of "James' town"; or Richardsons Creek instead of "Richard's Son's Creek." When in text the whole name can be put in the genitive form with an apostrophe at the end as in "Rogers Point's rocky shore." Although apostrophes are not used to indicate connotative or genitive meaning between the specific and generic parts of a geographical name, they are often used to indicate a missing letter (Lake O' the Woods) or when they normally exist in a surname used as part of a geographical name (O'Malley Hollow).

### 3.8 Abbreviation

The names of States can be officially abbreviated according to Government Printing Office standards. These abbreviations are:

<u>State</u>	<u>Traditional Abbreviation</u>	<u>Post Office Symbol</u>
Alabama	Ala.	AL
Alaska	(No Abbrev.)	AK
Arizona	Ariz.	AZ
Arkansas	Ark.	AR
California	Calif.	CA
Colorado	Colo.	CO
Connecticut	Conn.	CT
Delaware	Del.	DE
District of Columbia	D.C.	DC
Florida	Fla.	FL
Georgia	Ga.	GA
Guam	(No Abbrev.)	GU
Hawaii	(No Abbrev.)	HI
Idaho	(No Abbrev.)	ID
Illinois	Ill.	IL
Indiana	Ind.	IN
Iowa	(No Abbrev.)	IA
Kansas	Kans.	KS
Kentucky	Ky.	KY
Louisiana	La.	LA
Maine	(No Abbrev.)	ME
Maryland	Md.	MD
Massachusetts	Mass.	MA
Michigan	Mich.	MI
Minnesota	Minn.	MN
Mississippi	Miss.	MS
Missouri	Mo.	MO
Montana	Mont.	MT
Nebraska	Nebr.	NE
Nevada	Nev.	NV
New Hampshire	N.H.	NH
New Jersey	N.J.	NJ
New Mexico	N. Mex.	NM
New York	N.Y.	NY
North Carolina	N.C.	NC
North Dakota	N. Dak.	ND

Ohio	(No Abbrev.)	OH
Oklahoma	Okla.	OK
Oregon	Oreg.	OR
Pennsylvania	Pa.	PA
Puerto Rico	P.R.	PR
Rhode Island	R.I.	RI
South Carolina	S.C.	SC
South Dakota	S. Dak	SD
Tennessee	Tenn.	TN
Texas	Tex.	TX
Utah	(No Abbrev.)	UT
Vermont	Vt.	VT
Virginia	Va.	VA
Virgin Islands	V.I.	VI
Washington	Wash.	WA
West Virginia	W. Va.	WV
Wisconsin	Wis.	WI
Wyoming	Wyo.	WY

Other geographical names are not normally abbreviated in sentence context except that "Mount" and "Saint(e)" may be abbreviated as "Mt." and St(e)." On maps and illustrations, the generic part of a name and also a few adjectival modifiers such as Middle, North, South, East, West, Left, Right, and Saint(e) may be abbreviated. The specific part of a geographical name is not normally abbreviated.

### 3.9 Numbers in Geographical Names

Arabic and Roman numerals in geographical names are normally spelled out and combined in writing to form single words whenever possible as in "Fortynine and One Half Creek" and "Fourmile Run."

### 4. The Geographic Names Information System

The Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) is a computer-based names information file developed by the U.S. Geological Survey in cooperation with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. The System currently contains information for approximately two million geographic names and serves as an official source for data (including geographic coordinates) relating to named geographic features, places, and areas in the United States. Information can be retrieved, manipulated, analyzed, and organized to meet the general and specialized needs of a wide variety of users for both research and application. Products of the system include books, microfiche, magnetic tapes, and specialized computer printouts, such as those included on the individual volumes of the National Gazetteer.

### 5. The National Gazetteer of the United States of America

One of the products of the Geographic Names Information System is the National Gazetteer, a compendium of official, administrative, and historical geographic names, published by State. Each volume of the National Gazetteer will list as many known name entries as possible of populated places, natural features, and categories of cultural features such as dams, reservoirs, churches, schools, hospitals, shopping centers, cemeteries, and airports. Each name entry includes

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the official or primary name in alphabetical order followed by information relating to feature class, official status of the name, the county in which the named feature is located, geographical coordinates of the feature, and source or head coordinates of certain linear features such as streams, elevation when appropriate, name of primary U.S. Geological Survey quadrangle map at 1:24,000-scale on which the feature can be located, and variant or other names applied to the feature. So far, gazetteers for the States of New Jersey, Kansas, Delaware and Arizona have been published. Initial compilation of other State gazetteers has been completed and will be published in the near future. This includes the one-volume Concise Gazetteer of the United States which was designed to meet national and international needs.

## 6. The Nature of Geographical Names in the United States

### 6.1 Binomial Names

The majority of geographical names in the United States are binomial in form consisting of two words--a specific and generic part. This binomial standard is strong, and in written use may lead to a combination of words in the specific part of a name, such as Fifteenmile Run (stream) and Bigpinetree Hill.

### 6.2 Complex Names

Although binomial names are most common, a large number of names may vary. The generic part of a name normally describes a single landscape term like brook, hill, rio, peak, or lake. The specific part may consist of several words representing a variety of grammatical elements, Jenny Lind Bluff, Lake O' the Woods, Fond du Lac, Cliffs of the Seven Double Pillars, Cañon del Rajadero de los Negros, and To-Hell-and-Gone Canyon.

### 6.3 Names with Unique Generics

Some names in the United States have relatively unique generic forms like Bald Alley (ridge), Butlers Toothpick (pinnacle rock), Titans Piazza (hill), and Devils Racepath (ridge).

### 6.4 Definite-Article Names

Variations of the binomial form include names that require a capitalized article "The" when written: The Bend, La Pica, The Cape, and The Maze. This does not include names of certain kinds of features with normal generics that are preceded by the uncapitalized definite article when written in sentence context. In these cases, the generic part of the name is often omitted. For example, Potomac River, Mojave Desert, and Atlantic Ocean can be referred to in speech or writing as "the Potomac," "the Mojave," and "the Atlantic." Sometimes the specific parts of these names are expressed in plural form when the generic is omitted as in "the Rockies" (Rocky Mountains). The full form of these names, however, is always used on maps and in gazetteers.

**6.5 Single-Word Names**

Single-word names like Boston, Oolite, and Pinhook are commonly used for populated places. The one word specific, without a generic, may sometimes be used for a major mountain.

**6.6 Legal and Common Usage**

Incorporated populated places and organized political divisions often have an official/legal long-form name such as "City of Denver," "Town of Northport," or "Commonwealth of Virginia" and then a short form common geographical name, Denver, Northport, and Virginia. Both the legal and common name, in such cases, are considered official. Federal and other maps normally show the common name, but usage varies.

**6.7 Group Names**

When writers use several geographical names in sequence with the same generic, the names may be treated as a group with the generic shown in plural form: "Calumet, Manitowoc, and Sheboygan Counties;" "Wisconsin and Illinois Rivers."

**7. Pronunciation of Geographical Names**

As with other words in the English language, the spelling of a geographical name may not always be a clear indication of its pronunciation. The same name may contain different stress or vowel length when used in different areas. A simple name like Lima, for example, is pronounced "lima" (IPA) in one place and in another as "laima" (IPA). Pronunciation of geographical names may also vary within a local area. A name derived from a minority language may have more than one local pronunciation. A special subcommittee of the Board on Geographic Names is currently studying the possibility of developing a key in order to convey local pronunciation of a name that differs from what may be expected when reading its written form.

**8. Domestic Names Publications**

The U.S. Geological Survey, in cooperation with the Board on Geographic Names, produces the following publications to assist in the national standardization of geographical names and its gazetteer programme:

- a. Orth, D.J., "Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names, U.S. Board on Geographic Names," Reston, Virginia, 1987, 40 p.
- b. Payne, R.L., "Geographic Names Information System" U.S. Geological Survey, Data Users Guide 6, Reston, Virginia, 1985, 34 p.
- c. Orth, D.J. "Authorities and Organizations Involved With Geographic Names--1985: United States, Canada, Mexico," U.S. Geological Survey, Open-File Report 85-305, Reston, Virginia, 95 p.
- d. Orth, D.J. and Payne, R.L., "The National Geographic Names Data Base Compilation Procedures: Phase II," U.S. Geological Survey Circular, 112 p.

- e. Payne, R.L., "Geographic Names Information System Users Guide," U.S. Geological Survey, Open-File Report 84-551, 1984, 139 p.
- f. "Decisions on Geographic Names in the United States," U.S. Board on Geographic Names, published quarterly, Washington, D.C.
- g. "The National Gazetteer of the United States of America," U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper 1200, Washington, D.C., Those currently available:

- New Jersey (1200 NJ) 1982, revised 1983, 220 p.
- Delaware (1200 DE) 1983, 101 p.
- Kansas (1200 KS) 1984, 326 p.
- Arizona (1200 AZ) 1987, 715 p.

9. Information Sources

Communications concerning geographical names in the United States, the above listed publications, or the Geographic Names Information System should be addressed to:

Executive Secretary  
Domestic Geographic Names  
U.S. Board on Geographic Names  
National Center Stop 523  
Reston, Virginia 22092

All other inquiries should be addressed to:

Executive Secretary  
U.S. Board on Geographic Names  
Defense Mapping Agency  
Building 56  
Naval Observatory  
Washington, D.C. 20305

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