

UN Group of Experts on
Geographical Names

Sixth Session
New York, March 5-26, 1975

Paper Submitted by the
United States-Canada Division

REPORT ON ACTIVITIES SINCE THE FIFTH URGEEN MEETING

General. Because each of the countries of this Division have long been active in various names standardization programs, there have been few problems which have required their mutual attention. For this reason, therefore, no divisional meetings have been scheduled. Nevertheless, closer liaison will be established between the United States and Canada to the end that they may work more effectively on matters for which they are responsible under the auspices of the United Nations Group of Experts.

Since the 5th meeting of the URGEEN, both the United States and Canada have continued to work as separate bodies on many programs. This report will deal with their activities separately.

UNITED STATES

Most of the work of the United States respecting the standardization of geographical names has been carried out by the US Board on Geographic Names, which has programs involving both domestic and foreign names. With regard to domestic names, BGN approved approximately 2000 names along with their related descriptive terms. These names, which are approved for official United States use, are required principally for large-scale topographic maps and are carried in publications called Decision Lists issued every three months. Through the assistance of the US Geological Survey, with which BGN works closely, an automated file of some 12,000 names in the State of Massachusetts has been established. The file contains up to 19 categories of data for each entry.

The idea of a domestic gazetteer for the United States continues to be discussed, and there is evidence that a commercial organization may work with BGN files to produce such a document. In the meantime, the American Names Society, which is an independent organization, continues to be concerned with the collection of place names through its American Names Survey.

BGN also was active in the field of foreign names. In the last few years, it has worked increasingly on a cooperative basis with various countries, with the BGN gazetteers often being the foundation for such cooperation. Since the last meeting of the Group of Experts, BGN also has produced a number of gazetteers, among them being British Solomon Islands and Gilbert and Ellis Islands; Republic of China; Fiji, Tonga, and Nauru; French Guiana; Haiti; Laos; Libya; New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna; New Hebrides; Southern Rhodesia; and Surinam.

Efforts also continue to add names to the BGN gazetteers of Antarctica and of Underseas Features. Since 1973, approximately 200 new names for both areas have been standardized.

Shortly after the 1973 meeting, a survey was made of users of the BGN gazetteers. The survey, which was sent to approximately 600 addresses representing offices and individuals in the United States and in other countries, consisted of a questionnaire that sought user comments on nearly 20 points. The responses indicated a high degree of user satisfaction with the publications, and showed that they were employed for a broad range of purposes. Among those responding were official agencies of the United States and of other nations, domestic and foreign publishers, libraries, educational institutions, and individuals. While it had generally been known that the gazetteers were popular, as demonstrated by the fact that supplies of certain of these publications were quickly depleted, the survey provided for the first time an objective picture of user satisfaction. One of the most unusual uses of gazetteers is ornithological research, and it is interesting to note that the work of ornithologists often depends on the kind of locational information presented by the gazetteers.

Of particular interest to the Group of Experts is the fact that BGN recently established an advisory committee to work with names of features on extraterrestrial bodies. This organization will answer the need to channelize names of planetary features into a format, such as a gazetteer, to meet official and other needs within the United States. It is envisaged that this new committee will work closely with the International Astronomical Union.

The United States also has been active in international names programs through its membership in the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH). Through a PAIGH body, the Committee on Geographical Terminology, work involving the standardization of geographical terminology is carried out in the member nations of PAIGH. In this connection, the cooperation and support of Dr. Gall, the UN Expert for Latin America, is important.

The United States continues to be responsive to requests from other nations which inquire about assistance in the creation and operation of national standardizing agencies. While such requests normally come to specific mapping agencies, such as the US Geological Survey, it is the BGN that provides the desired information.

It may be useful to offer some comments about the role of the BGN in the United States. The standardizing function of BGN has application only to official documents prepared by agencies of the US government. While the decisions made for both domestic and foreign names are almost exclusively followed by state and local bodies and by publishers, this is not always the case. In point of fact, BGN makes its decisions on domestic names after close consultation with local authorities, and generally accepts local views. By the same token, commercial publishers in certain cases have used names other than those approved by BGN for foreign areas.

Commercial publishers play a significant role in the dissemination of geographical information in the United States. They are responsible for virtually all reference works, textbooks, atlases, globes, and related items that contain geographical material. In this connection it is important to say that despite assumptions to the contrary, one such product constitutes a gazetteer of the United States. Reference should be made to the Rand McNally Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide. Issued annually since 1870, this publication contains maps and listings identifying approximately 110,000 places in the United States.