

Ninth Session of the -
United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names

New York, 17-27 February 1981
Agenda item No. 6

ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA IN GEOGRAPHICAL
NAMES SINCE THE EIGHTH SESSION OF THE UN GROUP OF EXPERTS
ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

(Submitted by the United States of America)

Over the past two years, the United States continued to be active along numerous sectors of names standardization. As was the case in 1979, this report summarizes activities according to the relevant committee of the U.S. Board on Geographic names. A separate paragraph, however, covers international action.

Publications Committee

In April of 1980, this committee published a long-awaited pamphlet that described the structure, mission, and function of the Board. Designed to meet the need for an informal publication for general use, the item was a cooperative work of several agencies represented on the Board. Consisting of nine pages of text and illustrations, the booklet has been sent to numerous individuals and agencies who sought information about the Board.

Domestic Names Committee

In addition to making decisions on some 2,000 names problems (new names, changes in names, changes in spelling of names), the committee initiated studies of some of its operating policies. One of the major concerns is the policy governing name changes. A study of past examples of name changes showed that inconsistent policies have been followed. In attempting to deal with inconsistent practices, the committee found that there are a number of considerations which affect decisions. For example, since local authorities have primary jurisdiction on names decisions, what does the committee do when a local recommendation does not fully meet certain committee policies. This subject has been on the agenda of committee meetings and of meetings held with state geographic boards, and likely will continue to be of concern for some time.

One of the most significant actions that has ever come before the Board in the domestic area remains unresolved. As reported in the US report to the Eighth UNCEGN Session, the State of Alaska asked the Board to change the name of Mt. McKinley to Denali, cited as the original Indian name for the highest mountain in North America. The committee has carried out a number of actions, including holding public meetings in various parts of the country to determine popular feelings on the matter. Currently, however, the issue is before the US Congress, a situation that prevents committee action at this time.

In the area of publications, the committee, in cooperation with the US Geological Survey, has prepared a large number of gazetteers of individual states. At present, there are some 42 gazetteers ready for final publication; all 50 states are scheduled for completion within a few months. Prepared through automated data processing, the gazetteers show names carried on standard map series. As the committee approves new names, the gazetteers will be automatically corrected.

The committee also plans to publish a national gazetteer. With some 45,000 names, the volume will follow specifications recommended by the UNGEGN. At this time, there is no fixed schedule of production.

As before, the committee continues to cooperate with state geographic boards or similar authorities. There are now 35 state agencies operating to make decisions on local names questions. In November of 1980, several states met in Salt Lake City, Utah during the Fourth Mountain State Conference on Geographic Names. The committee held its monthly meeting immediately afterward. The two events provided federal and state names experts an opportunity to discuss various questions and to build a more useful relationship.

Foreign Names Committee

The most important action taken by the committee since the Fifth Session was the publication of a gazetteer of the People's Republic of China in August of 1979. This item, which was released in August of 1979, lists some 20,000 names of features in China with associated locational data, including latitude and longitude to the nearest minute of arc. The gazetteers is essentially two publications: one shows names alphabetically in the Pinyin spelling, with Wade-Giles names as cross references, while the second shows Wade-Giles names with Pinyin cross references. The Pinyin entries were taken from (or derived from) the Provincial Atlas of China (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Fen Sheng Dituji, Hanyu Pinyinban) published in 1977. The new gazetteer answered numerous questions confronting official Federal agencies, educational publishers, and the press media who needed an authoritative source for names in China. As additional names information from China becomes available, new editions of the gazetteer will be issued.

Since 1979, the committee was active in other areas as well. Reflecting changes made in foreign countries, the Board accepted new names, changed names, and made decisions affecting other related data: all together, some 400 names were involved. Information about major name decisions was circulated to a list of about 900 agencies who have a need to keep abreast with geographic names. To accomplish this, 8 issues of a bulletin, "Foreign Names Decisions by the US Board on Geographic Names", were mailed. The latest bulletin is dated January 1, 1980.

Substantial progress was made on several gazetteers, including Ethiopia, Somalia, Greenland, Andorra, and the Netherlands. Work on the gazetteer of Papua New Guinea is being delayed until a problem of format change is resolved. Finally, some 16,000 names in the Indonesia file have been changed to conform to the new orthography adopted by that country several years ago.

In the near future, the work of the committee will be facilitated by the introduction of ADP. Initially, selected files of names will be converted to disc format and tied to desk-top devices for the use of operators in various ways. The devices consist of three elements: a Central Processing Unit (CPU), a keyboard console, and a printout machine. An operator calls up a name, along with its affiliated data, which is portrayed on a screen. At this point, the operator can add, correct, delete or otherwise modify the information. For writing systems that require special markings that are not part of the record, the operator can also generate new symbols, letters, or other graphic elements for insertion into the file as required. This unique capability expands the versatility of the system considerably. Finally, the printout device produces the information in any desired format. This system will enable the staff of the Foreign Names Committee to respond to inquiries and update files at a considerable savings of time. A subsequent device will be added so that the printout will be in reproducible copy, thus ready for publication in gazetteer format and quality. Future plans call for converting all names files to ADP and providing a capability for automatic type placement directly for map and chart production. This effort is being carried out by the Defense Mapping Agency as part of its support to the Board.

Advisory Committees

Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names

This advisory committee, which, with its predecessor body, has been active in geographic names and associated terminology in Antarctica since 1947, met periodically. A major accomplishment was completion of a new (fourth) edition of a gazetteer of geographic names in that continent; it will be published in the near future. Containing some 12,000 names, including about 2,000 approved by the Board since the last (1969) edition, it also has historical and biographical background for each entry. Support for research and publication has been provided by the US National Science Foundation, the agency responsible for funding US research and mapping programs in Antarctica.

Advisory Committee on Extraterrestrial Feature Names

Owing to a general lack of planetary mapping programs, this committee has had little occasion to meet recently. Furthermore, since the International Astronomical Union is recognized as the authority for selecting and applying names, the committee has little requirement for carrying out this kind of work. Discussions are now under way to determine the best mechanism to use to meet the statutory requirement that all geographic names on US cartographic and related products be approved by the Board.

Advisory Committee on Names in Micronesia

This is a new committee established late in 1979 to standardize names of features in the Trust Territories of the Pacific Islands, a region of the western Pacific mandated to US administration by the United Nations. Standardized names are required for a mapping program being carried out by the US Geological Survey, the nation's principal mapping agency for domestic areas. Initial meetings of representatives of this committee (including people living in the concerned area) brought about agreement concerning principles, policies, and procedures for working with names. This means that for the first time, geographic names representing the different languages and writing systems of the concerned islands will be standardized with the involvement of experts who live in the area. Staff linguists in Washington will review decisions proposed by committee members to assure adherence to established rules.

Advisory Committee on Undersea Features

The committee met several times during the two-year interval and approved some 140 names proposed by oceanographers, bathymetrists, and others dealing with undersea features. Work on a new gazetteer of undersea features was essentially finished, after some three years' labor, and publication is expected in the very near future. The gazetteer contains about 6,000 names (including some 2,400 variant names) of which approximately 600 were approved since the last (1971) edition. Another important accomplishment was the development of nine new terms and definitions for "minor" undersea features which are appearing on maps and charts of the US continental shelf. While somewhat similar in shape to features in deep waters, they are distinct enough to warrant separate terminology. Prior to selection, the terms and definitions were circulated to experts for comment and to reach as much acceptance as possible. Already they have been applied to a few names of features on maps of the shelf. A working paper submitted by the United States entitled "Terms and Definitions of New Undersea Features" provides additional details on the topic.

Committee on Names and Automation

Federal agencies represented on the Board have long recognized the need for developing automated procedures to manage names information. The US Geological Survey and the Defense Mapping Agency have already established capabilities in this area, as reported above. Members of the Board became concerned that as other agencies began to plan for automation, variations in the treatment of names might occur. To assure maximum conformity in forms and application of names, and to establish a climate where agencies can share their experiences in working toward automation, the Board set up a new committee in 1980. This body, the Committee on Names and Automation, has met once to discuss general guidelines and procedures for coordinating efforts of concerned offices.

The Board and International Cooperation

Immediately after the Eighth UNGEGN Session, the Board met with the British Permanent Committee for Geographical Names, the eleventh in a series of conferences that started in 1948. This meeting provided US and British colleagues an opportunity for exchanging views on questions of mutual importance. As a result, collaboration on certain names problems was intensified, with the goal of maximum interchange of expertise and of cooperation on programs of joint concern. The twelfth conference is tentatively scheduled for late summer of 1981.

In 1980, the Board provided a six-week training course in methods of standardizing names for a representative of the Survey Department of Nigeria. The purpose of the course was to share information about US principles, procedures, and philosophy of names work for the benefit of names authorities in Nigeria. During the process, useful information was exchanged, and Board members and staff gained important knowledge about names in Nigeria.

Authorities of the Pan American Institute on Geography and History have recently approved a plan developed by the Executive Secretary of the US Board for a series of gazetteers to be produced by PAIGH member nations. Names in the gazetteers will be taken principally from a new series of topographic maps at 1:250,000 which are also being produced as a PAIGH effort. Other sources will also be used. A working group now being established will meet within the next few months to define specifications and to set up production schedules. It is expected that the Board will fully collaborate with other names authorities during the program.