



## Rocky Mountain Mapping Center

### Isn't That Spatial? # 7: Teaching About Place Names

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The names we give to valleys, streets, rivers, mountains, landmarks, and even regions and countries reflect characteristics of the land and the people who settled it. Therefore, studying names on the landscape can contribute significantly to the understanding of the cultural and physical geography at any scale, from neighborhood to continent. Much has been written in the *Journal of Geography* and other fine journals and books about the value of teaching geography using place names, or toponyms. Space does not permit an explanation of why name study is important, so I will select just a few reasons why places have the names that they do, and then provide sources and ideas for integrating name study in geography.



The Lakota, members of the family of the Great Sioux Nation of North America, have a very rich spirituality and a deep respect for all life, visible and invisible. The word **Lakota** means "considered friends" or "alliance of friends". [Click for larger image.](#)



Signs near canola fields near Royston, northeast of London, England. [Click for larger image.](#)

Toponyms may be descriptive (such as the Rocky Mountains), or associative (Spring Creek--the spring fed the creek). Toponyms may refer to incidents (Battle Mountain), people (Pittsburgh, Julesburg) or commemorate a famous person, such as San Jacinto or Houston. Washington and Jackson are repeated thousands of times across the landscape.

Names can be commendatory to praise a place, such as Pleasant Grove. An extension of this type of name is the plethora of boosterism-type names given to places to attract settlement. On the 1894 Colorado map for sale by the USGS, one can find dozens of these types of towns on the eastern plains. In Progress, Atlanta, and New Hope, not a single building stands 100 years later. Some names are manufactured--simply made up, such as Reklaw (Walker spelled backwards), while other names may be the result of a mistake. Mistakes include historic errors in identification or translation, such as the West Indies, which is not west of the Indies nor is it the Indies.

When they settled new territory, people often named things on the landscape based on where the people were from. These are called "shift names." New Leipzig, North Dakota reflects 19th century German settlers, for example; others include Palestine and New England. Conversely, many names are from the indigenous people who may have lived in an area for centuries. Some indigenous names are a translation of a native language into English, French, or the language of the dominant culture.

Names, like language itself, are dynamic, and may have changed in meaning over time. Some names that are now considered offensive have been changed recently, although changing names is difficult to do. In the USA, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names was created in 1890 and established in its present form by Public Law in 1947. Comprised of representatives of Federal agencies appointed for 2-year terms, the Board is authorized to establish and maintain uniform geographic name usage throughout the Federal Government.

Some names reflect the particular mood of when the feature was named, such as "Disappointment Creek." Have the students find out who was disappointed, why, and when. Some names reflect the philosophy of those who named them, such as the fondness for classical culture and order, resulting in names such as Ithaca and Syracuse.

Caution should be used in studying place names, and so, as elsewhere in the curriculum, an emphasis should be placed on knowing the data. For example, Agate, Colorado, was apparently not named after the rock "agate," but rather from "A Gate" that marked the entrance to a ranch in the area!

## **Ideas for Studying Geographic Names in the Curriculum**

First, examine the active dockets and the monthly meeting minutes of the Board of Geographic Names with your students, and discuss why names were changed. What names do students think should be changed?

<http://geonames.usgs.gov/bgn.html>

Second, query the USGS Geographic Names Information System on:

<http://geonames.usgs.gov/>

What are the most common names that your students can think of? Which first or last name of the students in your class is the most common? Are there any student's names that don't appear in the Geographic Names Information System?

Third, examine how different countries came to have the names that they do, using Matt Rosenberg's Geography Site:

<http://geography.about.com/library/misc/bltoponym1.htm>

Fourth, read the following books:

Off the Map: The Curious Histories of Place Names, by Derek Nelson

Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States, by George R. Stewart. I read this about 10 years ago and learned a great deal.

Storyville USA, by Dale Peterson. I read this earlier this year; a wonderful story about a dad who took his two kids to bizarre place names across the USA. They begin in Start, Louisiana, and finish in Deadhorse, Alaska, stopping by Winner, Hallelujah Junction, and Likely.

Fifth, use gazetteers to find places online:

For the USA: <http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/gazetteer>

A new one that I use quite a bit: <http://gazetteer.hometownlocator.com/>

World Gazetteers: <http://www.world-gazetteer.com/home.htm>

Sixth, but not least, get out those USGS topographic maps, road maps, geologic maps, minerals maps, hydrologic maps, historical maps, and atlases!





Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Some say the name came from Gitche Manitou, an Indian name for Great Spirit; others say it is named for the Chippewa word "munedoo-owk" meaning "the place of the good spirit."

Studying names is fascinating, and can uncover much about physical and cultural geography.

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URL: [http://rockyweb.cr.usgs.gov/outreach/isntthatspatial\\_7\\_placenames.html](http://rockyweb.cr.usgs.gov/outreach/isntthatspatial_7_placenames.html)

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