

An Introduction to Geographical Names and the Newfoundland and Labrador Geographical Names Board

What are geographical names?

Geographical names or place names (or toponyms) are the proper nouns applied to topographical features and settled (and used) places and spaces on the earth's surface. Toponyms occur in both spoken and written languages and represent an important reference system used by individuals and societies throughout the world.

Toponymy refers to the study of geographical names, or place names, of a particular region. The term *toponym* is derived from the Greek words *topos* - meaning place and *onoma* - meaning name. A toponymist will normally look at not only the meaning of a given name but also at the history of the area. Doing so helps reveal the story behind the name and, it is said, "every name has a story to tell."

Significance of Geographical Names

Most people view place names simply as labelling conveniences to identify features on maps or public signs. Geographical names, or toponyms, however, form an integral part of the linguistic, cultural and historical character of a country or region. The study of toponymy is thus concerned with the origins and meanings of all geographical names and with the changes these names have undergone, in form, spelling and pronunciation. The latter takes the study of place names into the field of linguistics.

Toponyms include the names of all natural features such as islands, mountains, hills, lakes, rivers and bays and also cultural (human made) features such as cities, towns, villages, parks, fields, roads and bridges. General categories, or families, of place names such as islands or mountains are referred to as generics. Names of individual features (spoken, written or understood) are called specifics. In the toponym Signal Hill, Signal is the specific part, Hill the generic. The name St. John's uses only the specific part of the toponym but a listener or reader is expected to know that the name refers to the place of a settled community, in this case a city. Naming conventions vary by language. In French it is normal to place the generic first, whereas in English it is most common to put it last. Names which originated in French but were adopted into English usage often retain linguistic evidence of their initial form as in Harbour Grace (originally la Havre de Grace) or Port de Grave.

Place names form part of the vocabulary of all cultural groups and can thus reflect important aspects of the individual cultures which create and use them. Language itself is often regarded as the most central part of culture and the chief means whereby other aspects (ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and values) are learned, transmitted and preserved. All geographical names are cultural in the sense that they originate in the spoken languages of different human groups and are inherited and passed on orally, often with changes, from one generation to another. Another way of looking at geographical names is to view them as language on the landscape (the linguistic landscape), or, in broader terms, the language of the earth's surface (including underwater areas) implanted by cultural groups. Place names are essentially the cultural footprints and indicators of societal occupation and awareness by different peoples.

The naming of geographical features and places is probably as natural and spontaneous as the naming of individual persons and probably as old. The purposes of geographical naming are to differentiate among natural features on the landscape and to define significant spaces of human social, economic and spiritual activity. Naming is a defining process in creating earth surface identity and providing a means for cultural groups to comprehend and relate to their environment.

Origin of Geographical Names in Canada

Natural features and places in Canada as elsewhere received their names in two ways. Some were imposed by persons who hold authority. Most names, however, were given by common people. That is, they evolved from the spontaneous creation and collective usage, by ordinary persons (men, women and perhaps children) in the normal course of settling into and living, working, and playing in an area. Names imposed by authority are called statutory names (names provided by law) and the authors of such names are often known. The origin of names created by people in local communities is usually more difficult to determine because such names often persist in oral usage for long periods before they are written down and used on maps or settlement and road signs. The important feature of 'people names' is that they are shared, that is, they become community names, irrespective of who invented them in the beginning. Many features are given more than one name; some people use one, others another.¹ In such cases, toponymic field workers record all versions but authorities then have to decide which name is most suitable to be official.

Some of the older names in North America came from early European explorers, fishermen, traders and settlers. In many instances the features in question already had names in native languages which European authorities and mapmakers ignored either because they simply did

¹ Field surveys carried out in communities on the Avalon Peninsula by undergraduate geography students at Memorial University in the 1980s showed that upwards of 20 percent of the natural features identified by contributors had more than one name and that some features had as many as three or four different names.

not know them or found them too difficult to pronounce and spell. In some cases, however, native toponyms were adopted, converted to a usable form, and have become the official names in use today. The name of our country is said to have evolved from the word *kanata* a Huron word meaning 'cabin' or 'group of huts' which explorer, Jacques Cartier, heard and first recorded near Montreal in 1550. Overtime this localized name spread and was adopted for all the land mass that became Canada. In recent times many places have reverted to their original native names. The newly created territory of Nunavut occupied mainly by Inuit, for example, effectively takes in nearly one-fifth of Canada; fittingly, in Inuktitut *Nunavut*, means 'our land'. In our province the Mi'kmaq people of Conne River have restored the name Miawpukek as the name of their community. In Labrador the communities of Natuashish and Sheshatshiu are the two principal communities of the Innu people and these names reflect their cultural identity. Meanwhile, the Inuit of northern Labrador recently negotiated a land claims agreement to an area and named it Nunatsiavut which in Inuktitut means 'our beautiful land.'

Other notable Canadian names derived from native languages include Saskatchewan from *kisiskatchewan* meaning 'swift-flowing river' and Yukon from the word *youcon* meaning 'big river.' The name Manitoba is said to be from Lake Manitoba, the home of the Cree Great Spirit, *Manatuapa*. Canada's capital, Ottawa, was first known as Bytown but later given the name of a local Indian tribe, the Outouacs.

Recording Names

One of the chief challenges yet most basic needs in toponymy is to record the names used in communities and regions by consulting older residents who either invented these names or, more commonly, inherited them from older generations. Once recorded and defined by location (geopositioned, given a geographical position reference) names are securely preserved and can be considered for official use. The recorded toponymy not only helps to expand data bases for mapping and other practical purposes such as mining exploration, travel and recreational use, search and rescue operations, emergency measures, national security, and land use planning, it preserves vital aspects of cultural history which might otherwise be lost forever with the death of elders and the demise of traditional life styles. This is one reason why aboriginal and First Nations people in Canada today regard the recording of toponymy as a critical element of their cultural heritage and identity. The traditional names in their cultures had to do with survival, identifying hunting and fishing sites, sacred places and providing other important information about the history of their respective areas. Toponymy thus provides for them a main link to their ancestors and ancestral lands and is a central theme in their history as a people.

Most regions of Canada have been systematically field surveyed for their local toponyms. Many of those gathered have been approved for official use. Others (with variant spellings or alternate names), are compiled in toponymic data bases. All are preserved for future reference. Names

adopted for official use are those selected according to principles and procedures of geographical naming adopted by the agencies or persons responsible for collecting, compiling, and approving place names. Most provinces and territories have naming boards though some appoint civil servants to make decisions on geographical names including which should be official, proper spellings and other matters. After statutory names (the names of municipalities, territorial divisions, reserves, parks and other legal entities), the main guiding principle used by most naming authorities including the Newfoundland and Labrador Geographical Names Board (NLGNB), is that first priority is given to names with long-standing local usage by the general public. This priority helps insure that vital cultural information is preserved.

In recent years the NLGNB has sought the voluntary assistance of members of the general public and various government agencies to collect new geographical names. These efforts have been supervised and directed by the Provincial Secretary and have resulted in very positive and encouraging results. The Board is now seeking new opportunities to expand this type of public involvement in the naming process. The idea of involving schools in the study of toponymy has often been considered a desirable goal both for its value as a component of studies in history, geography and heritage but also as a means of involving students in an active and meaningful research project in the preservation of their own cultural history.

Naming Authorities and the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC)

Geographical naming in Canada comes under the jurisdiction of naming authorities such as the Newfoundland and Labrador Geographical Names Board. These authorities make up the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC). Created in 1897, the GNBC consists of 27 members - one from each province and territory - and federal government departments or agencies concerned with mapping, translations, statistics, archives, defence, national parks, and Indian lands. A further four members deal with etymology, classification, computer services ([Global Positioning](#), etc), and undersea - feature names. Today, the GNBC also concerns itself with the promotion of official names and encourages the development of international naming policies in conjunction with the United Nations.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the GNBC has developed a list of guidelines for new names. These guidelines, originally created in 1898, are rarely used to initiate naming procedures, but instead are used to judge new names for acceptability. The most important principle of naming in Canada is local usage. A name which becomes official is usually a long-established name which is widely used in the local community but this can only be determined through research.

Mandate of the Newfoundland and Labrador Geographical Names Board

The NLGNB is the main authority appointed by the government to collect and manage geographical names in the province outside of municipalities. Municipalities (cities, towns etc.)

are empowered to decide on their own place names and features such as streets, roads, parks and playgrounds.

The main responsibility of the NLGNB is to administer the *Geographical Names Board Act* (CHAPTER G-3; 1991 c29 s2).

The Act gives the board with the following duties:

- The collection and recording of information on the names of places and geographical features;
- consultation with government and agencies on the selection of place names, or the renaming of places and features;
- considering and making changes to existing names;
- collaboration with the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) on naming standards, practices and principles;
- holding public meetings or inviting submissions where disputes arise over names and naming practices; and
- recommending to the Minister for approval the official names of places and geographical features.

Presently the NLGNB dataset contains about 30,000 official geographical names. The vast majority of these were approved from locally used toponyms (people names) collected in consultations with residents in different regions. It has been estimated, however, that there are as many 50,000 other names in oral usage which have never been recorded. Many of these are known only to the more elderly. One of the main priorities of the NLGNB is to make additions to the provincial toponymic coverage by encouraging local residents to complete reviews of the names currently on maps and in data bases, compile lists of previously unrecorded names and, where necessary, suggest amendments and corrections (spellings, placement of names on maps, alternate names etc.).

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