

United States Board on Geographic Names Foreign Names Committee

Principles, Policies, and Procedures



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Preface

The existence of a body of standardized geographic names widely available on a national basis, but related strongly to local usage, makes a significant contribution to savings and efficiency in the operation of government, business, communications, and education. The United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN) Foreign Names Committee (FNC) works hard to improve that body of names and has prepared this document to serve a diverse audience interested in federally recognized geographic names.

For Federal agencies, this document defines the parameters and standards for official feature names so that these names can be consistently incorporated into agency products.

For educators, students, and the public at large, this document explains the BGN/FNC's operation and provides a clear statement of the principles and policies that guide the BGN/FNC's decisions. It also provides references that will help the reader find information about those decisions.

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Chapter 1. Geographic Names Overview

It would be ideal if all people were to use a single name for a geographic feature and only one feature was known by that name. In practice, the extent to which this ideal can be reached varies due to sociopolitical conditions, the mobility of people and their naming habits, and the flexibility of language use. Confusion and misunderstanding occur when the name of a geographic feature is spelled in different ways, when different names are used for the same place, when the same name is used for different places, or when a name is applied to a feature in an unexpected or different way from common practice. Standardization of the written form and application of a name has become increasingly important because of reference needs associated with the development of natural sciences; sophisticated transportation and communication systems; land, mineral, and water rights; and accurate large-scale maps, charts, and geospatial databases.

U.S. Board on Geographic Names

The systematic standardization of geographic names in the United States began in the late 19th century. After the American Civil War, there was a surge of mapping and scientific reporting associated with the exploration, mining, and settlement of the western territories. Inconsistencies and contradictions among the many names, their spellings, and their applications became a serious problem for mapmakers and scientists who required uniform, non-conflicting geographic nomenclature.

On March 18, 1890, key persons in several Federal agencies concerned about the lack of geographic names uniformity on Government maps and other publications met at the invitation of Professor Thomas Corwin Mendenhall, Superintendent of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. After several meetings during which procedures and principles of names standardization were formulated, it was realized that the program would be more effective if it had broader support. The issue was taken to President Benjamin Harrison who agreed with these objectives.

On September 4, 1890, President Harrison signed Executive Order 28 (see *Appendix A*), establishing the United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN). The BGN was given authority to resolve all unsettled questions concerning geographic names. Decisions of the BGN were to be accepted as binding by all departments and agencies of the Federal Government.

In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt extended the responsibilities of the BGN (Executive Order 492). In addition to adjudicating conflicts, it now had authority to standardize all geographic names for Federal use, including name changes and new names.

The First Report on Foreign Geographic Names was published by the U.S. Geographic Board (as the BGN was called from 1906 to 1934) in 1932. This report identified six rules for the spelling of foreign geographic names for official use by the Federal Government. These six rules

generally deal with “forms” or “types” of names that may be described as conventional names, local official names, and names in non-Roman scripts. A “First General List of Foreign Geographic Names” decision was included in the report and contained approximately 2,800 approved feature names as well as variant spellings.

The current period in the BGN’s history began in 1947 when the United States Congress re-established the BGN by Public Law 80–242, codified at 43 U.S.C. 364–364f (see *Appendix B*). The BGN, conjointly with the Secretary of the Interior, is directed to establish and maintain uniform geographic name usage throughout the Federal Government. This includes resolving name discrepancies, approving new names, validating and recording existing names, and promulgating all official names.

New or revised principles and policies, and in some cases procedures, shall be taken to the full BGN membership for review before being submitted to the Secretary of the Interior.

Since 1947, foreign names standardization has been carried out in the name of the BGN by its Foreign Names Committee (FNC), which meets quarterly. Consisting of members and deputies representing the Departments of Commerce, Defense, Homeland Security, and State, as well as the Central Intelligence Agency and the Library of Congress, it is responsible for standardizing the names of places, features, and areas outside the 50 states, other areas under the sovereignty of the United States, and Antarctica. The Executive Secretary and staff support for the foreign names activities of the BGN and the maintenance of records relating to names of undersea features are provided by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) in the Department of Defense (see below). Official foreign names for Federal use are available in the NGA’s GEOnet Names Server (GNS); see <https://geonames.nga.mil/gns/html/index.html>.

Also, since 1947, the standardization of domestic names for use by the departments and agencies of the Federal Government has been carried out by the BGN Domestic Names Committee (DNC). Consisting of members and deputies representing the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Homeland Security, and Interior, as well as the Government Publishing Office, Postal Service, and Library of Congress, it is responsible for standardizing the names of places, features, and areas within the 50 States and in other areas under the sovereignty of the United States. The executive secretary and staff support for the domestic names activities of the BGN and names activities for Antarctica are provided by the U.S. Geological Survey, an agency in the Department of the Interior. Official domestic names for Federal use are recorded in the Geographic Names Information System; see <https://www.usgs.gov/us-board-on-geographic-names/domestic-names>.

BGN members and staff have represented the United States in various international programs to standardize names.

Foreign Names Committee

The FNC operates in accordance with principles, policies, and procedures approved by the BGN and the Secretary of the Interior. The FNC uses staff services provided by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) and renders decisions on foreign geographic names. The FNC performs other duties as the BGN may assign. The FNC informs the BGN about current and anticipated programs of their member departments and agencies that have a bearing on foreign geographic names.¹

The following departments and agencies are represented on the Foreign Names Committee: The Department of Commerce, the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Library of Congress.

Geographic Names Database

The Geographic Names Database (GNDB) is the official source for foreign geographic names for Federal use. GNDB content is disseminated via the GNS, which is updated weekly. The GNS site hosts a wealth of resources related to geographic names data, including country policies, romanization policies, and geographic codes.

There are no licensing requirements or restrictions in place for the use of the GNS data. However, the BGN recommends using the following citation to identify the GNS as a source:

“Toponymic information is based on the Geographic Names Database, containing official standard names approved by the United States Board on Geographic Names and maintained by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. More information is available at the Products and Services link at www.nga.mil. The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency name, initials, and seal are protected by 10 U.S.C. § 425.”

Comments or suggestions recommending a correction or change to an official geographic name record in the database can be initiated by submitting the appropriate information to the Executive Secretary for Foreign Names, U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Such corrections or changes are generally based on discovered typographical errors or evidence that local or predominant published or legal usage conflicts with the official record. Proposed changes must be submitted to the Board for review and approval before they can be used in Federal publications.

All proposals should clearly identify the feature and must include evidence supporting the proposal. Other procedures require identification by means of accurate geographic coordinates. The BGN's decision may differ in name, choice, form, spelling, or application from that recommended by the proposing agency or individual. However, all Federal agencies are

¹ BGN Bylaws, September 18, 2015.

required to accept the Board's decision and to correct their maps and reports accordingly before publication, or, if already published, at the time of the next printing.

The BGN also invites the submission of data sets. Potential contributors should contact the Foreign Names staff for more information and instructions.

Characteristics of Foreign Geographic Names

Script is the first issue in preparing foreign geographic names for U.S. Federal Government use. Many languages (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Arabic, Hebrew, Russian, and Greek) are written in non-Roman letters or characters. The GNDB contains place names in such scripts but these must also be converted or transliterated into romanized ones. The BGN and the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN) jointly develop or approve romanization systems and Roman-script spelling conventions for just this purpose.² The GNS website contains approved romanization system tables. One should use these systems when applicable. Unfortunately, they do not exist for every language. When none does, one should look for a romanization system used, if not promulgated, by the most authoritative entity, usually the foreign government or the community of scholars working with or in the language.

Next, though written in Roman letters, authoritative foreign geographic names may sometimes be in a language whose orthography has only recently been standardized. When this occurs, one may need to apply spelling rules developed and authorized *after* the names were originally collected. For example, ethnographer Edward Winslow Gifford published the first and, so far, only comprehensive list of Tongan place names in 1923. Twenty years later, the government of Tonga issued orthographic rules for all Tongan-language words. For the names in Gifford's 1923 gazetteer to be correct by current standards (and therefore suitable for entry into the GNS), the 1943 orthographic rules must be applied.

Finally, a country may have more than one official language. Different cantons of Switzerland use German, French, Italian, Romansch, or a combination of these. Each language is official. Certain nationally significant toponyms, such as the name of the country itself, may have four different orthographies, each of them approved: Schweiz (deu), Suisse (fra), Svizzera (ita), and Svizra (roh). Further, many Pacific island nations did not attain independence until the mid- to late twentieth century. At various times of foreign administration or invasion, German, Japanese, and English were the official languages. Only after achieving independence did many of the native languages become co-official with English. To reinforce the sense of national identity and self-administration, island governments often replace once-official English place names with their original native equivalents.

² The 2004 BGN/PCGN Agreement is found at Appendix C.

Chapter 2. Foreign Geographic Names Principles

Introduction

Public Law 80–242 (1947) (see *Appendix B*) instructs the BGN, subject to the approval of the Secretary of the Interior, to formulate principles, policies, and procedures with reference to both domestic and foreign geographic names; and to decide the standard names, their orthographies, and applications for official use by the United States Federal Government. The following principles serve as a guide to the Foreign Names Committee (FNC) and the BGN when establishing policies and procedures and making decisions on foreign geographic names.

Principle I. Names in Official Sources

The FNC will collect geographic names from the highest-level official sources. In the absence of an official source, names will be collected from the best source available. Examples: *Atlas de México, 1:250,000, Dirección Nacional de Geografía, 1982* (official source); *Road Atlas of Iran, 1:1,000,000, Gītāshenāsī, 1990* (commercial source).

Principle II. Names in Roman Script

Geographic names rendered in Roman script will retain all special characters and diacritic marks.

Examples: Łódź (Poland), Hafnarfjörður (Iceland), Gəncə (Azerbaijan), Elâzığ (Turkey).

Principle III. Names in Non-Roman Script

The FNC will romanize geographic names rendered in a non-Roman script according to systems approved by the BGN. Examples: Москва/Moskva (Russia); 서울/Seoul (South Korea); دمشق / Dimashq (Syria).

Principle IV. Multiple Approved Names for a Feature

A general principle of the FNC is to approve one name for a feature. However, a feature may have multiple approved names based on context. Examples include conventional names, names found in areas with multiple official languages, and names of features that cross political or language boundaries.

Principle V. Names Established by Other Bodies

The FNC may approve for use names of features established by international or other relevant bodies. Examples: airfields (International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)), oil fields (Information Handling Services (IHS) Markit), refugee camps (United Nations).

Chapter 3. Foreign Geographic Names Policies

Introduction

Subsequent to the six rules published in the First Report on Foreign Geographic Names, no codification of FNC's policies was published until March 1982. For the FNC Principles, Policies, and Procedures (PPP), key policies have been reviewed and collated below.

Policy I. Name Types

The FNC records geographic names using the following name types:

1) Conventional names

Definition: A commonly used English-language name approved by the BGN for use in addition to, or in lieu of, a BGN-approved local official name or names. Examples (Conventional name/Approved name): Rome/Roma, Damascus/Dimashq, Galapagos Islands/Archipiélago de Colón.

Policy: For the purposes of the BGN, a Conventional name, with few exceptions, is one that has had general usage for an extended period of time and is used by the American (and English-speaking) public. Conventional names will be kept to a minimum. A Conventional name will be retired when it is determined that use of only the Approved name will no longer cause confusion. A Conventional name usually differs from the official local name and will ordinarily not contain diacritical marks. Approved names and Conventional names have equal status, and the choice of which to use should be based upon context. All Conventional names must be approved by the Foreign Names Committee.

2) Approved names

Definition: The BGN-approved local official name for a geographic feature. Most features have only one Approved name; exceptions are features for which there are names in more than one official language (e.g., Helsinki/Helsingfors) and international features (Qomolangma Feng/Sagarmāthā for the feature with the conventional name of Mount Everest).

Policy: In most cases, Approved names are collected from the most official national or local source and reflect the name as used officially in the language(s) of the country or area in which it is found. Thus, foreign-language descriptive terms that appear in a geographic name are usually used in Approved names, e.g., Archipiélago de Colón, Isthmós Korínthou, Poluostrov Kamchatka. Approved names and Conventional names have equal status and the choice of which to use should be based upon context.

3) Provisional names³

Definition: A geographic name of an area for which the territorial status has not been finally determined or that is not recognized by the United States.

Policy: The Provisional name type is meant for a small and select number of features that, for political or other reasons, should not be formalized with an Approved name, but because of pervasive usage require a standard name for provisional use. All Provisional names are coordinated with the Department of State and must be approved by the Foreign Names Committee.

4) Approved Non-authoritative names

Definition: A name collected from the best available source(s) when authoritative sources are not available.

Policy: An Approved Non-authoritative name may be used in the absence of any of the name types listed above.

5) Approved Transitional names

Definition: An existing Approved name awaiting implementation of a new toponymic policy.

Policy: Approved Transitional names become Variant names upon application of the new toponymic policy. Example: Names in a formerly approved romanization system awaiting update to a newly approved romanization system.

6) Anglicized names⁴

Definition: Anglicized names are derived by modifying an Approved name to render it more accessible or meaningful to an English-language user. They are not official names, and they may or may not be in local use. Examples include Dubrovnik-Neretva for Dubrovačko-Neretvanska Županija (Croatia), South Kalimantan for Kalimantan Selatan (Indonesia), and Sofia City for Sofiya-Grad (Bulgaria).

Policy: Anglicized names are not official names but rather are a class of unofficial Variant names tailored to the use of an English language audience. The BGN may create an Anglicized name as a standardized unofficial variant for an Approved name that does not meet the criteria for a Conventional name. All Anglicized names must be approved by the Foreign Names Committee.

³ Approved at FNC 368 (August 2011).

⁴ Approved at FNC 365 (October 2010).

7) Variant names

Definition: A name for a geographic feature that cannot be classified under one of the above name types. Examples of Variant names include names not in local use, former names, and unofficial names such as minority-language names.

Policy: A variant name may not be used alone, but may be added as a parenthetical qualifier following a Conventional or Approved name, e.g., Mumbai (Bombay). Variant names may not be used for country names or ocean and sea names (see “Policy V: Names of Maritime Features” below).

8) Non-Roman script names

Definition: A geographic name written in its original non-Roman script form.

Policy: In standardizing foreign geographic names for the U.S. Federal Government, the FNC is *not* responsible for establishing a BGN-approved non-Roman script spelling of a geographic feature name. However, there are benefits in having available the best or most official non-Roman script spelling of a geographic name.

This name type will be used for names that fall into one of the following three categories:

- 1) The non-Roman script spelling of a BGN-approved geographic name.
- 2) The best or most official non-Roman script spelling of a geographic name.
- 3) The non-Roman script form of a Variant name.

Policy II. Romanization

Geographic names not written in Roman-script languages are romanized to derive U.S. Government standard forms. The BGN develops or adopts romanization systems that allow for names written in non-Roman script to be converted to Roman script.

- 1) For each non-Roman-script language, a BGN romanization system is selected according to the following five unordered factors (in practice, it is rarely possible to satisfy all five of these criteria with a single romanization system). A romanization system should:
 - a) express the phonemic contrasts of the source language;
 - b) result in names pronounceable by an English speaker;
 - c) use common symbols from an English language perspective;
 - d) be reversible, so the user can reconstruct the original non-Roman script form; and
 - e) be widely used, and ideally shall have been applied on maps.
- 2) Where possible, a romanization system should use letters for consonants as pronounced in English, and vowels as pronounced in Spanish (as in the words *amigo* and *pueblo*). For non-Roman script characters that represent sounds not commonly found in English, BGN-established conventions should be used, for instance ‘kh’ for characters of similar pronunciations found in Arabic, Armenian, Hebrew, Persian, and Russian.
- 3) Diacritical marks or letter groupings (digraphs, trigraphs, etc.) may be used, but they should be kept to a minimum.

Policy III. Long Forms and Short Forms

Some geographic names are composed of two elements: a specific term and a generic term (Example: the Conventional name Rhine River, in which ‘Rhine’ is the specific term and ‘River’ is the generic term). The specific term distinguishes a name from others of the same feature class. The generic term usually describes what the feature is (as in the previous example). The long form is the complete form of a geographic name that includes the specific term(s) and the generic term(s). The short form is typically composed of only the specific term(s). Not all geographic features have a short form. The BGN will approve short forms as necessary and prudent to facilitate ease of use. If a feature has an approved long form and short form, either name may be used depending on context. Examples: Argentine Republic (long form), Argentina (short form); County Durham (long form), Durham (short form); Amazon River (long form), Amazon (short form); Frankfurt am Main (long form), Frankfurt (short form).

Policy IV. Name Selection⁵

In cases where a geographic feature has more than one associated name, the following order of precedence is recommended when users require a single name for application:

- 1) Conventional names*
- 2) Approved names
- 3) Provisional names
- 4) Approved Non-authoritative names
- 5) Approved Transitional names

*Conventional and Approved names have equal status and either may be used depending on context.

There are situations in which, by policy, more than one Approved name for a feature will exist, e.g., for international features (except high-seas features) and for features within a country where more than one language is considered official. When there is more than one Approved name, the user will choose the appropriate name depending on context.

Policy V. Names of Maritime Features⁶

This policy applies to maritime features located beyond a coastal state’s internal waters, to include waters where international rights of transit passage exist. Maritime features include bays, gulfs, oceans, seas, straits, and undersea features.

- 1) The standardization policy for undersea features located more than 50% beyond a coastal state’s territorial sea limit is set forth in “Policies and Guidelines for the Standardization of Undersea Feature Names.”

⁵ Approved at FNC 372 (August 2012).

⁶ Approved at FNC 406 (June 2021).

2) Only Conventional names will be approved for the following:

a) Features beyond a coastal state's internal waters that are bordered by land areas of opposing or adjoining coastal states having different sovereignty and language.

Example: Persian Gulf

An exception will be made when the feature has no Conventional name; in such cases only local official names will be approved.

Example: Skagerrak

b) International waters (shared or divided sovereignty) subject to the rights of transit passage (straits between opposing coastal states).

Example: Strait of Gibraltar

3) Local official names and, where they exist, Conventional names will be approved for the following:

a) Features beyond a coastal state's internal waters formed by recession in the continuous coast of a single coastal state.

Example: Gulf of Sidra [Conventional]; Khalij Surt [Arabic]

b) Features within the archipelagic waters of a single coastal state.

Example: Java Sea [Conventional]; Laut Java [Bahasa Indonesian]

c) Features beyond a coastal state's internal waters bordered only by land areas having the same official language.

Example: Gulf of Sollum [Conventional]; Khalij as Sallūm [Egypt, Libya]

d) Shipping canals governed by international treaty.

Example: Panama Canal [Conventional]; Canal de Panamá [Spanish]

4) Local official names only will be approved for the following:

a) Features within the territorial sea of a single coastal state, where country-specific policies apply (features deemed in need of a Conventional name will be considered on a case-by-case basis).

b) All undersea features within the internal waters and territorial sea of a single coastal state.

Additional Guidance:

It is recognized that geographic names for some waterbodies overlap (e.g., Golfo di Genova/Ligurian Sea/Mediterranean Sea). The BGN recommends that the user select the most appropriate name for the specific application.

Policy VI. Historical Features⁷

In the NGA/BGN Geographic Names Database, a historical feature is a feature determined to no longer exist.

Identification Criteria:

- 1) Features that have been disestablished (e.g., a former first-order administrative division) are historical.
- 2) Features that are destroyed by human or natural means and are no longer locatable (e.g., a town permanently flooded by a river impoundment), or whose existence has been otherwise disestablished or disproved are historical. Lack of recent cartographic evidence will not constitute sufficient proof that the feature no longer exists.
- 3) Historical features may also be physical features that have been named and have been determined in subsequent years to not actually exist. This is the case for several features in the Undersea Features file.
- 4) Ancient sites, ruins, battlefields, etc., the existence of which can still be discerned on the landscape, are not covered under this policy.

Procedure:

- 1) A date will be entered into the 'Terminate Date' field in the Geographic Names Database to identify historical features. This date may be an effective date of a legislated change, if available, or the date the database action was taken.
- 2) The use of any other previously used schema to identify historical features (i.e., double parentheses, historical feature name types, and historical feature designations) shall cease. All records utilizing former schema will be corrected using the above procedure. If those schemas were utilized to indicate something other than the current definition of a historical feature, alternate methods shall be sought.

Policy VII. Airfield Names⁸

Airfields may include features such as airbases, airfields, airports, air strips, heliports, and landing fields. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) collects airfield names through its Member States. The BGN recognizes ICAO airfield names as official. Where no ICAO provided name is available, the best-available sources are used to provide standardized names for airfields.

⁷ Approved at FNC 397 (March 2019).

⁸ Approved at FNC 375 (June 2013).

Policy VIII. Application of Variant Names⁹

For purposes of cross-referencing or clarification, BGN policy allows the use of Variant names in parentheses following the BGN approved name of a geographic feature, e.g., Mumbai (Bombay) or Borneo (Kalimantan), in text and cartographic applications. There are two feature-based exceptions to this rule, based on BGN policy and historical practice, listed below. This policy is not intended to prohibit the use of dual approved names, where they exist, by the use of parentheses or other means.

Oceans and Seas. All waterbody features assigned to Category 2 in the BGN Maritime Features Policy are to be referred to with a single name. Variant names are not to be used parenthetically for these features. For high-seas features that are typically considered a subset of a larger sea feature, e.g., Alboran Sea/Mediterranean Sea or North Atlantic Ocean/Atlantic Ocean, either of the Conventional or Approved names, as described above, can be applied to that feature, depending on context.

Independent States. All independent states, as identified in the GNS by the feature designation code PCLI (independent political entity), are to be referred to by their Conventional, or in the absence of a Conventional, Approved short- or long-form name, as context requires. Variant names are not to be used parenthetically for the names of independent states unless an exception is made by the BGN in coordination with the U.S. Department of State.

Policy IX. Dual Names (Multiple Names)¹⁰

A dual name (multiple name) is defined as two (or more) names for the same feature, usually, but not always, in different languages and having the approval of a names authority. In the NGA/BGN Geographic Names Database, a feature with a dual name (multiple name) will most commonly be captured with separate Unique Name Identifiers (UNI) within a single Unique Feature Identifier (UFI). However, in some cases, treatment will follow the precedent or standard set by the relevant national names authority, which may present the dual name (multiple name) in a manner that, for policy reasons, both/all names must be used in cartographic, reporting, or listing purposes. These names may be captured in a single UNI using appropriate indicators (e.g., slash mark (/), hyphen (-), etc.) to separate the names. The relevant country-specific standardization policies (country policy) should include detailed guidance.

Examples: Recorded in a single UNI: *Uluru / Ayers Rock (Australia); Stewart Island / Rakiura (New Zealand); Vitoria-Gasteiz (Spain)*; Recorded in separate UNIs: *Arbīl, Erbil, Hewlêr (Iraq); Brussels, Brussel, Bruxelles (Belgium); Lagoa do Mirim (Brazil), Laguna Merín (Uruguay)*.

Note: Geographic features with short-form names fall into a separate category and are therefore excluded from this policy. Short-form names are considered extensions of an

⁹ Approved at FNC 394 (June 2018).

¹⁰ Approved at FNC 405 (March 2021).

approved name. Prior to the development and approval of the Name Selection policy, and name ranking procedures, short-form names were simply an attribute of a single UNI. In the current procedures of the FNC staff, all short forms are captured with a separate UNI. Furthermore, it is possible that some features with dual names would themselves have short-form names.

Chapter 4. Foreign Geographic Names Procedures and Guidelines

Names Under FNC Purview

The FNC is responsible for all foreign geographic names, including those of oceans and seas, but excluding Antarctica. Usually, the FNC does not rule on the names of features established by international or other relevant bodies (see “Principle V: Names Established by Other Bodies”). It retains the legal authority to promulgate all official geographic names.

The names of features that fall into the following categories must be approved by the FNC before they are considered official:

- 1) Countries
- 2) Country capitals
- 3) First-order administrative divisions
- 4) Seats of first-order administrative divisions
- 5) Major international features
- 6) All features in the Oceans file.

In addition, the FNC must approve all names assigned the following name types:

- 1) Conventional
- 2) Provisional
- 3) Anglicized Variants.

The FNC staff at NGA processes all other foreign geographic names in accordance with the approved principles, policies, and procedures.

Sources of Foreign Geographic Names

Authoritative sources of geographic names include official maps and government publications, including census and statistical data from the relevant country. Many nations have a national authority for their geographic names. The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) maintains a list of national authorities, available at:

<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/countrylinks.html>. In some cases, a host country engages a second country to handle production data, which is then considered official. For example, Australia typically produces maps of and for Papua New Guinea. Several countries produce toponymic guidelines, which can be found at:

<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/toponymic.html>.

Name Change Proposals

The FNC does not encourage, but occasionally receives, geographic names proposals. When this occurs, FNC staff and the Committee address them, as appropriate. On the other hand, the FNC does encourage notifications of data updates or errors. In these cases, the source of the appropriate name should be identified or provided to the FNC staff at geonames@nga.mil.

Country Policies

The U.S. BGN FNC staff prepares country-specific geographic names standardization policies referred to as “country policies.” A country policy is a collection of background information and guidance written by and for the staff, especially to orient and train new analysts. The document addresses policies on language, toponymy, and political geography; provides recommended sources; and includes appendices of generic terms, common abbreviations, and administrative maps. Country policies are submitted for approval by the FNC. Approved country policies are posted on the GNS.

Name Rank

Name ranking was implemented with the approval of the Name Selection Policy (see above). By BGN policy, all approved names (name types C, N, D, and P) may be used. The choice of which to use may be left to the user’s discretion. General procedures for the staff to apply name ranking are as follows:

- 1) When there is a Conventional name, it will receive Name Rank 1.
- 2) When there is a long and short form of the name, the short form will receive Name Rank 1, the long form Name Rank 2.
- 3) When there are multiple official languages in the country (or geopolitical entity) follow any existing guidance put forth by the country regarding language status.

For example: Finland has two nationwide official languages, Finnish and Swedish. Sami is an official minority language in four second-order administrative divisions. The Finnish language name will receive Name Rank 1 except in municipalities where the Swedish-speaking population constitute the majority, in which case the Swedish name will receive Name Rank 1. Sami will receive Name Rank 2 except in cases where there is only a Sami name for the feature.

In the absence of guidance, make the decision based on the availability of source material, the language used by the majority of residents in an area, and any other relevant factors available and verified. Items #1 and #2 continue to apply to all names in item #3.

- 4) For international features where the feature name is known for each country in which the features exists, there are two methods for assigning Name Rank. One method is to determine in which country the majority of the feature exists and then this country’s spelling receives Name Rank 1. When this cannot be determined or the difference is insignificant, base the decision on alphabetical order by country name in the absence of any other meaningful determining factor.
- 5) In countries with multiple orthographies, the name in each orthography will follow the customary order used locally.

Chapter 5: Foreign Geographic Names Editorial Guidelines

The guidelines below are general in nature. Tailored guidance may be found in the country-specific geographic names standardization policies (country policies).

Abbreviations

The BGN spells out abbreviations in approved foreign geographic names. Users of the approved names may abbreviate but should consider relevant rules in the Government Publishing Office (GPO) *Style Manual* and should provide a guide to the abbreviations.¹¹ The Central Intelligence Agency Cartographic Center currently maintains a list, which is posted on the GNS, of recommended abbreviations for country names.

Articles

All Romance and many Germanic languages, as well as others belonging to non-Indo-European language families, contain articles (i.e., equivalents of English “a,” “an,” and “the”). When an article appears – whether in full or foreshortened – as the first element of a toponym, it should be capitalized:

- **La** Paz (a populated place in Mexico)
- **The** Hague *or* **Den** Haag (the capital of the Netherlands)
- **L'**Houmeau (a populated place in France)

When an article appears in any other position, it should be in lower case:

- Rothenburg ob **der** Tauber (a populated place in Germany)
- Punta Paloma o de **los** Corrales (a point on the southern shore of Spain)
- Tunnel de **la** Savine (a tunnel in Switzerland)

An exception occurs when a toponym contains a capitalized article sanctioned by tradition or by a local entity authorized to determine such orthography:

- **Ka** Lae O **Ka** 'Ilio (a populated place in Hawaii)
- San Lorenzo de **El** Escorial (a populated place in Spain)

¹¹ FNC 90 (April 27, 1953).

Capitalization

Capitalization of foreign geographic names follows the usage as found in the official sources of Roman-script data, with exceptions. In some languages (e.g., Slavic languages), secondary and adjectival words are not capitalized. In these cases, English capitalization rules are imposed.

- Karlovačka županija, Croatia (a county) would be standardized as Karlovačka Županija for BGN purposes.

Generics

A generic is a term that describes a geographic feature. Examples include words such as 'river,' 'hill,' and 'lake.' Except in cases in which the generic term does not match the feature type, generics appearing in standardized name forms should be considered true generics. Otherwise, the term is considered to be a false generic and should not be collected as a generic. Generics are not recorded separately for English language terms.

Generic terms are often displayed on native sources in a form that differs from the root dictionary form. They are rendered in the name as they appear on native sources, but the Generic field in the GNDB will be populated with the root form of the generic.

- Example from Kazakhstan: Bayqongyr Qalasy, generic is Qala.

Numbers

Cardinal and ordinal numerals that occur in geographic names should usually be spelled out completely in BGN-approved names.

- 1) Numerals will ordinarily be spelled out (in the language of the country concerned).
- 2) Roman numerals will be retained in specific terms.
- 3) Arabic numerals will be retained in names that consist of a unit of measure or time (with or without a generic) plus a number.
- 4) Initial numerals will be spelled out.
- 5) Ordinal numerals (except as in clause 2) will be considered as abbreviations and spelled out.
- 6) A numeral following a generic will be retained if generally used.
- 7) The retention or omission of 'No.,' 'Number,' or an equivalent foreign language abbreviation or word will be decided on a country-by-country basis.
- 8) Non-initial numerals will be alphabetized as if spelled out.

Exceptions to these general procedures will be discussed in country-based standardization policy documents (country policies).

Examples:

- Twenty-one Maing (၂၁-မိုင်; 21-Maing), populated place (Burma) [number spelled out in name]
- Pic des Trois Seigneurs (Pic des 3 Seigneurs), peak (France) [number spelled out in name]
- Budapest Harmadik Kerület; Budapest III. Kerület, second-order administrative division (Hungary) [number retained in name; clause 2 above, but also, both names are Approved (name type code ‘N’)]
- Shahrak-e Bīst-o Seh-ye Bahman (Shahrak-e 23 Bahman), populated place (Iran) [number spelled out in name]
- Cheongcheon II-dong (청천 1 동; Cheongcheon 1-dong), third-order administrative division (South Korea) [number spelled out in name]

Sort Order

A sort name is a form of the full name that allows for alphabetical sorting of the file into gazetteer sequence. For Roman script names, all character and diacritic combinations and special characters are substituted with U.S. English keyboard characters; all characters are upper-cased; numerals are converted to lower-case characters (0–9 = a–j); spaces and hyphens are removed; and commas are replaced with a space. Additionally, for non-Roman script names in languages using Arabic-based letters, short vowel markings and pointers are removed. The GNS includes a ‘SORT ORDER’ field, allowing the data end user to sort names.

Unicode Encodings

The current Unicode character code charts may be obtained at <https://unicode.org/charts/>. A standard reference for Unicode encodings exists in the UNGEGN “Technical reference manual for the standardization of geographical names” (2007), available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/pubs/>. Relevant encodings are also included in BGN/PCGN romanization system tables.

GeoNames Soft-Copy Keyboard

The GeoNames Soft-Copy keyboard was created to provide easy access to romanized Unicode special characters and letter/diacritic combinations and to maintain a uniform input of said characters when adding or editing entries in the GNDB. The keyboard and details about its use are available on the GNS site https://geonames.nga.mil/gns/html/gns_services.html.

Appendix A

Executive Order 28

As it is desirable that uniform usage in regard to geographic nomenclature and orthography obtain throughout the Executive Departments of the Government, and particularly upon the maps and charts issued by the various Departments and bureaus, I hereby constitute a Board on Geographic Names and designate the following persons, who have heretofore cooperated for a similar purpose under the authority of the several Departments, bureaus, and institutions with which they are connected, as members of the said Board:

Prof. Thomas C. Mendenhall, United States Coast and Geodetic Survey, chairman.

Andrew H. Allen, Department of State.

Capt. Henry L. Howison, Light-House Board, Treasury Department.

Capt. Thomas Turtle, Engineer Corps, War Department.

Lieut. Richardson Clover, Hydrographic Office, Navy Department.

Pierson H. Bristow, Post-Office Department.

Otis T. Mason, Smithsonian Institution.

Herbert G. Ogden, United States Coast and Geodetic Survey.

Henry Gannett, United States Geological Survey.

Marcus Baker, United States Geological Survey.

To this Board shall be referred all unsettled questions concerning geographic names which arise in the Departments, and the decisions of the Board are to be accepted by these Departments as the standard authority in such matters.

Department officers are instructed to afford such assistance as may be proper to carry on the work of this Board.

The members of this Board shall serve without additional compensation, and its organization shall entail no expense on the Government.

Benj. Harrison.
Executive Mansion,
September 4, 1890.

Appendix B
Public Law 80-242 and as Currently Codified

[Public Law 242–80th Congress]
[Chapter 330–1st Session]
[S. 1262]

AN ACT

To provide a central authority for standardizing geographic names for the purpose of eliminating duplication in standardizing names among the Federal departments, and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Secretary of the Interior, hereinafter called the Secretary, conjointly with the Board on Geographic Names, as hereinafter provided, shall provide for uniformity in geographic nomenclature and orthography throughout the Federal Government. The Secretary may exercise his functions through such officials as he may designate, except that such authority as relates to the final approval or review of actions of the Board on Geographic Names shall be exercised by him, or his Under or Assistant Secretaries.

Sec. 2. There is hereby established a Board on Geographic Names, hereinafter called the Board. The membership of the Board shall include one representative from each of the Departments of State, War, Navy, Post Office, Interior, Agriculture, and Commerce, and from the Government Printing Office, and the Library of Congress. The Board may also include representatives from such Federal agencies as the Secretary, upon recommendation of the Board, shall from time to time find desirable, even though these agencies are in the departments otherwise represented on the Board. The members of the Board shall be appointed by the respective heads of the departments or independent agencies that they represent. Each member shall be appointed for a two-year term but may be reappointed to successive terms. The members of the Board shall serve without additional compensation. The Board shall nominate a Chairman to be appointed by the Secretary, and shall establish such working committees as are found desirable.

Sec. 3. The Board, subject to the approval of the Secretary, shall formulate principles, policies, and procedures to be followed with reference to both domestic and foreign geographic names; and shall decide the standard names and their orthography for official use. The principles, policies, and procedures formulated hereunder shall be designed to serve the interests of the Federal Government and the general public, to enlist the effective cooperation

of the Federal departments and agencies most concerned, and to give full consideration to the specific interests of particular Federal and State agencies. Action may be taken by the Secretary in any matter wherein the Board does not act within a reasonable time. The Board may make such recommendations to the Secretary as it finds appropriate in connection with this Act.

Sec. 4. The Secretary shall cause such studies and investigations to be made and such records to be kept as may be necessary or desirable in carrying out the purposes of this Act, and he shall provide a place of meeting and staff assistance to the Board. The staff shall be responsible to the Secretary, who shall prescribe its relations to the Board and the committees of the Board. The Secretary may establish from time to time, upon recommendation of the Board, advisory committees of United States citizens who are recognized experts in their respective fields to assist in the solution of special problems arising under this Act.

Sec. 5. For the guidance of the Federal Government, the Secretary shall promulgate in the name of the Board, from time to time and in such form as will carry out the purposes of this Act, decisions with respect to geographic names and principles of geographic nomenclature and orthography. The Secretary shall also furnish such additional information with respect to geographic names as will assist in carrying out the purposes of this Act.

Sec. 6. With respect to geographic names the pertinent decisions and principles issued by the Secretary shall be standard for all material published by the Federal Government. The United States Board on Geographic Names in the Department of the Interior created by Executive order, is hereby abolished, and the duties of said Board are transferred to the Board herein created, and all departments, bureaus, and agencies of the Federal Government shall refer all geographic names and problems to the said Board for the purpose of eliminating duplication of work, personnel, and authority.

Sec. 7. Nothing in this Act shall be construed as applying to the naming of the offices or establishments of any Federal agency.

Sec. 8. There are hereby authorized to be appropriated such sums as may be necessary to carry out the purposes of this Act.

Approved July 25, 1947

United States Code
TITLE 43—PUBLIC LANDS
Chapter 11A—Board on Geographic Names

§ 364. Uniformity in geographic nomenclature and orthography; exercise of functions of Secretary of the Interior

The Secretary of the Interior, hereinafter called the Secretary, conjointly with the Board on Geographic Names, as hereinafter provided, shall provide for uniformity in geographic nomenclature and orthography throughout the Federal Government. The Secretary may exercise his functions through such officials as he may designate, except that such authority as relates to the final approval or review of actions of the Board on Geographic Names shall be exercised by him, or his Under or Assistant Secretaries.

(July 25, 1947, ch. 330, § 1, 61 Stat. 456.)

§ 364a. Board on Geographic Names; establishment and membership; appointment and term of office

There is established a Board on Geographic Names, hereinafter called the Board. The membership of the Board shall include one representative from each of the Departments of State, Defense, Interior, Agriculture, and Commerce, and from the Government Publishing Office, the United States Postal Service, and the Library of Congress. The Board may also include representatives from such Federal agencies as the Secretary, upon recommendation of the Board, shall from time to time find desirable, even though these agencies are in the departments otherwise represented on the Board. The members of the Board shall be appointed by the respective heads of the departments or independent agencies that they represent. Each member shall be appointed for a two-year term but may be reappointed to successive terms. The members of the Board shall serve without additional compensation. The Board shall nominate a Chairman to be appointed by the Secretary, and shall establish such working committees as are found desirable.

(July 25, 1947, ch. 330, § 2, 61 Stat. 456; Aug. 10, 1949, ch. 412, § 4, 63 Stat. 579; Pub. L. 91–375, §§ 4(a), 6(o), Aug. 12, 1970, 84 Stat. 773, 783; Pub. L. 113–235, div. H, title I, § 1301(b), Dec. 16, 2014, 128 Stat. 2537.)

§ 364b. Formulation of principles, policies and procedures; action by Secretary; recommendations of Board

The Board, subject to the approval of the Secretary, shall formulate principles, policies, and procedures to be followed with reference to both domestic and foreign geographic names; and shall decide the standard names and their orthography for official use. The principles, policies, and procedures formulated hereunder shall be designed to serve the interests of the Federal Government and the general public, to enlist the effective cooperation of the Federal

departments and agencies most concerned, and to give full consideration to the specific interests of particular Federal and State agencies. Action may be taken by the Secretary in any matter wherein the Board does not act within a reasonable time. The Board may make such recommendations to the Secretary as it finds appropriate in connection with this chapter.

(July 25, 1947, ch. 330, § 3, 61 Stat. 456.)

§ 364c. Studies, investigations, and records; staff assistance; advisory committees

The Secretary shall cause such studies and investigations to be made and such records to be kept as may be necessary or desirable in carrying out the purposes of this chapter, and he shall provide a place of meeting and staff assistance to the Board. The staff shall be responsible to the Secretary, who shall prescribe its relations to the Board and the committees of the Board. The Secretary may establish from time to time, upon recommendation of the Board, advisory committees of United States citizens who are recognized experts in their respective fields to assist in the solution of special problems arising under this chapter.

(July 25, 1947, ch. 330, § 4, 61 Stat. 456.)

§ 364d. Promulgation of decisions; furnishing information

For the guidance of the Federal Government, the Secretary shall promulgate in the name of the Board, from time to time and in such form as will carry out the purposes of this chapter, decisions with respect to geographic names and principles of geographic nomenclature and orthography. The Secretary shall also furnish such additional information with respect to geographic names as will assist in carrying out the purposes of this chapter.

(July 25, 1947, ch. 330, § 5, 61 Stat. 457.)

§ 364e. Standardization of geographic names; abolition of United States Board on Geographical Names in Department of the Interior; transfer of duties

With respect to geographic names the pertinent decisions and principles issued by the Secretary shall be standard for all material published by the Federal Government. The United States Board on Geographical Names in the Department of the Interior created by Executive order, is abolished, and the duties of said Board are transferred to the Board herein created, and all departments, bureaus, and agencies of the Federal Government shall refer all geographic names and problems to the said Board for the purpose of eliminating duplication of work, personnel, and authority.

(July 25, 1947, ch. 330, § 6, 61 Stat. 457.)

§ 364f. Application to naming of offices or establishments

Nothing in this chapter shall be construed as applying to the naming of the offices or establishments of any Federal agency.

(July 25, 1947, ch. 330, § 7, 61 Stat. 457.)

Appendix C
BGN/PCGN Agreement 2004

United States Board on Geographic Names

Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use Jointly agree to:

Continue the series of BGN/PCGN Conferences at two year intervals, or more frequently as events warrant.

Establish and commence a joint programme of collaborative names standardization policies, procedures and guidelines on a country basis.

Maintain routine exchanges of geographical names sources and source assessments.

Establish and commence a joint programme to maintain a geographical names database.

Maintain, extend and continue to publish joint BGN/PCGN romanization systems.

Establish joint participation in international toponymic training courses.

Curtis C. Loy, Chairman, BGN

David Munro, Chairman, PCGN

April 22, 2004

Appendix D

Terms and Definitions¹²

American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII)

A 7-bit character code where every bit represents a unique character. The extended ASCII table is found at <http://www.ascii-code.com/>.

associative name

A feature name derived from, i.e., associated with, that of another nearby feature, e.g., *Rheinbrohl* (PPL; Germany) is named in association with the *Rhein* (STM).

bylaws

The rules of governance, e.g., structure and voting procedures, of the BGN.

See <https://www.usgs.gov/core-science-systems/ngp/board-on-geographic-names/resources>.

commemorative names

Names that recognize individuals or families who have made a significant contribution to a specific geographic area or feature, or who are nationally or internationally known for their contributions to the physical or cultural landscape, or have historical significance.

diacritic or diacritical mark

A mark added to a letter, typically to show pronunciation or to stress a letter.

established usage

A geographic name that has appeared consistently in written usage and/or has been expressed consistently in verbal usage, and that is supported by historical and/or current written materials and/or in folklore.

feature class

A designation for a group of features in a broadly defined descriptive category. All geographic features are assigned to one and only one class, and are chosen for efficient data search and retrieval purposes. These categories do not individually identify all kinds of cultural and natural features. They largely agree with dictionary definitions, but represent more generalized categories. They are defined for the purposes of the Geographic Names Database and have no status as standards.

¹² The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names has published a Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names (available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/pubs/>) and maintains an online database version of the glossary (available at http://ortsnamen.at/en/ungegn_glossary/).

Federal publication

Includes maps, books, reports, and other written communications—either conventional or electronic—prepared, commissioned, or sanctioned by the Federal Government. See 43 U.S.C. 364e (*Appendix B*).

gazetteer

A geographical dictionary or directory, a reference for information about places and place names, typically used in conjunction with a map or a full atlas. Contains information concerning the geographic names of physical and administrative features, including the feature type, location, size, and sometimes historical or descriptive information concerning the feature's name.

generic term

That part of a geographic name that refers to kind or type of feature. For example, *Río Paraná* (STM; Argentina), where *Río* is the generic part of the name. See also specific term.

geographic feature

Any relatively permanent part of the natural or manmade landscape or seascape that has recognizable identity within a particular cultural context.

geographic name

A name applied to a geographic feature. The proper name, specific term, or expression by which a particular geographic feature is, or was, known. May refer to any place, feature, or area on the earth's surface.

orthography

The conventional spelling system of a language; the study of spelling and how letters combine to represent sounds and form words.

place name

Same as geographic name.

policy

A general or specific statement, in writing, as to the process through which BGN decisions are made, actions are accomplished, or results are achieved.

principle

A fundamental doctrine that applies to all toponymic conditions; used to guide and determine present and future BGN decisions.

procedure

A set of instructions that outline steps for implementation of a policy.

specific term

That part of a geographic name that refers to the given name of the feature. For example, *Doi Inthanon* (MT; Thailand) where *Inthanon* is the given name for the feature. See also generic term.

toponymy or toponymic

The study of, or a reference to, geographic names.

transcription

The conversion of a representation of language into another representation of language.

translation

The conversion from one language to another language.

transliteration

The practice of converting a text from one writing system into another in a systematic fashion.

Unicode Standard

A character coding system designed to support the worldwide interchange, processing, and display of the written texts of the diverse languages and technical disciplines of the modern world. The standard is maintained by the Unicode Consortium, whose website provides a wealth of specifics about its development and implementation. See <http://www.unicode.org/>.

writing mark

A punctuation mark or system of symbols used to separate sentences and parts of sentences, and to make their meaning clear.

writing system

A method of visually representing verbal communication, based on a script and a set of rules regulating its use.

Appendix E Acronyms

ACAN—Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names
ACUF—Advisory Committee on Undersea Features
ASCII—American Standard Code for Information Interchange
BGN—Board on Geographic Names
DHS—Department of Homeland Security
DNC—Domestic Names Committee
DOC—Department of Commerce
DoD—Department of Defense
DOI—Department of the Interior
DOS—Department of State
FGDC—Federal Geographic Data Committee
FNC—Foreign Names Committee
GNBC—Geographical Names Board of Canada
GNIS—Geographic Names Information System
GNS—GEOnet Names Server
LOC—Library of Congress
NGA—National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency
PAIGH—Pan-American Institute of Geography and History
PCGN—Permanent Committee on Geographical Names
UNGEEN—United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names
USACE—U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
USBGN—U.S. Board on Geographic Names
USGS—U.S. Geological Survey