

BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES 125th ANNIVERSARY

SPECIAL EXHIBIT

September 18, 2015

Captions and Text by Jon Campbell, US Geological Survey

Exhibit Selections

Exhibit items originate from the collections of the Library of Congress, the Board on Geographic Names archives, and the US Army Corps of Engineers archives. Selected items are displayed in the glass cases located in the Geography and Map Division lobby.

CASE 1 (left side): BGN HISTORY

Established in 1890, the BGN approves and standardizes geographic names for the federal government. In the nineteenth century, with the expansion of maritime and commercial activities, growth of interest in western lands and Alaska, and an increasingly global outlook, inconsistencies among names, spellings, and applications were a serious problem for the federal government. By continuing to ensure uniform usage of geographic names, the BGN reduces duplication of effort among federal departments and agencies. There is no law that requires state or local governments or commercial enterprises to follow official BGN usage, but this is almost always done as a matter of efficiency.

From the earliest meetings of the BGN, decisions about the spelling and application of geographic names were compactly recorded on index cards. Today, the historical and current records of the BGN are maintained in large databases that are easily accessible to the public.

- 1.) *Board on Geographic Names, Executive Order 1890*
 - a. Facsimile (Jacquie Nolan)
 - b. Executive order for BGN, 1890

- 2.) *BGN Decision cards*
 - a. On loan from BGN Collection
 - b. Cards that show feature name decisions by the BGN

- 3.) *First report of the United States Board on geographic names*
 - a. Call no.: G105 .U5 1892 (General Collection)
 - i. LCCN: 04018260
 - b. First report of the BGN

- 4.) *United States Geographic Board – Meeting at the Forest Service, Washington, D.C., April 2, 1913*
 - a. BGN Collection
 - b. Photograph: acrylic case/frame

- 5.) *“Presented by The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use To The United States Board on Geographic Names On the Occasion of The Board’s Centennial In Recognition of A Close and Valued Association, 4th September 1990”*
 - a. On loan from Ralph Ehrenberg (LOC G&M)
 - b. Plaque for the centennial of the BGN.

CASE 2 (center): PLACE NAME HISTORY

Names on historical maps reflect the geographic understanding of contemporary mapmakers and provide insight about the cultural context of the time.

Martin Waldseemüller’s 1507 world map is the first to show the name *America*. The name *Cape Canaveral* is likely the oldest name of European origin for a distinct geographic feature in the United States.

Thomas Jefferson (later President Jefferson) is believed to have made the annotation for the spelling *Potomac* on L’Enfant’s Plan. The current BGN record for the name *Potomac River*, a BGN decision in 1931, lists 95 variant (unofficial) names and spellings.

- 1.) *Universalis cosmographia secundum Ptholomaei traditionem et Americi Vespucii alioru[m]que lustrationes*
 - a. Call no.:G3200 1507 .W3
 - i. LCCN: 2003626426
 - ii. Link: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3200.ct000725>
 - b. Map by Martin Waldseemüller; the first known document to name America

- 2.) *Peruuiae avriferae regionis typus / Didaco Mendezio auctore. La Florida / auctore Hieron. Chiaues. Guastecan reg.*
 - a. G3932.C25 1972 .D6
 - i. LCCN: 74691362
 - b. This map shows the place name *Cape Canaveral*, or *Cabo Cañaveral*, which was changed to *Cape Kennedy* after President Kennedy’s assassination. The name change caused anger and confusion among the local population who did not support the name change. The BGN rendered a decision to reverse the change in 1973.

- 3.) *Virginia / discovered and described by Captayn John Smith, 1606*
 - a. Call no.: G3880 1624 .S52 1819 Vault
 - i. LCCN: 99439987
 - b. A facsimile of John Smith’s map (as seen in the Geography and Map display case). This was the most detailed map of the Chesapeake area available until 1673. This map shows

the four major rivers in Virginia as their native names: “Powhatan”, “Pamunk”, “Tappahannock”, and “Patowomec”. These rivers were eventually renamed as “James”, “York”, “Rappahannock”, and “Potomac”. For more information, see the *Research Guide: “Virginia, Discovered and Discribed: John Smith’s Map of Virginia and its Derivatives”*, published by the Library of Virginia.

- 4.) *Plan of the city intended for the permanent seat of the government of t[he] United States : projected agreeable to the direction of the President of the United States, in pursuance of an act of Congress, passed on the sixteenth day of July, MDCCXC, "establishing the permanent seat on the bank of the Potowmac" : [Washington D.C.] / by Peter Charles L'Enfant*
 - a. Call no.: G3850 1791 .L4 Vault
 - b. Facsimile of a manuscript map from 1791, with annotations, including edits to change the spelling of “Potowmac” to its current spelling [Potomac].

CASE 3 (right side): GAZETTEERS

A gazetteer is a list of geographic names for use as a location index in conjunction with a map or atlas. A gazetteer may also serve as a more complex geographical dictionary that contains information about the geographic setting and socio-economic statistics of a place, region, or country. Known to have existed in ancient Greece since the Hellenistic era, gazetteers function as useful geographic references for citizens and governments around the world.

1.) Cosmographia

- a. Call no.: G1005 1482 Cosmographia Vault: fol.
 - i. LCCN: 48042060
- b. Page from the gazetteer section. The gazetteer section of Geographia/Cosmographia provides latitude and longitude values known during the 2nd century CE. This document meant future mapmakers and researchers could make reproductions of his map.

2.) Official gazetteer of Rhode Island

- a. Call no.: F77 .U53 (General Collection)
 - i. 32028197
- b. This is the first state volume published by the Board on Geographic Names.

3.) Block Island, Town of New Shoreham, Rhode Island

- a. Call no.: G3772 .B5 E635 1980 .B5 MLC
 - i. LCCN: 87691174
- b. This map features “Mohegan Bluffs,” named after the Native American tribe the Mohegans. The decision was rendered by the BGN in 1930.

4.) *Gazetteer of Chinese place names based on the index to V.K. Ting atlas. Compiled by the United States Board on Geographic Names. June 1944*

- a. Call no.: G2305 .T5 1934 Gazetteer 1944

- i. LCCN: 44041247
- b. This is an example of a World War II era gazetteer, published by the BGN. Place names are Romanized, along with their original Chinese versions, depicted with their accompanying characters.