

## The United States Board on Geographic Names (US BGN)

# An Introduction to the US BGN



PROVIDING OFFICIAL GEOGRAPHIC  
NOMENCLATURE FOR OVER 100  
YEARS

(information current as of February 2013)

*Where are you? Place names provide crucial geographic context. Without them, you're lost.*



## U.S. Board on Geographic Names

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names (US BGN) is the interagency organization of the United States Government established to maintain uniform geographic name usage throughout the Federal Government. It develops principles, policies, and procedures governing the spelling, use, and application of both domestic and foreign geographic names. Its decisions enable Federal users to apply geographic names uniformly across all official products. Americans use these products every day and usually take the place names for granted.

To promulgate standardized geographic names, Federal representatives to the US BGN represent a variety of interests, such as mapping and charting, population, ecology, management of public and offshore lands, foreign affairs, and national security. The Board represents the United States in international activities that promote standardization of geographic names across linguistic and political boundaries.

The US BGN has a web site that serves as a focal point to which problems, inquiries, changes, and proposals concerning geographic names can be directed. In partnership with international, Federal, state, local, and tribal governments, the US BGN provides a conduit through which uniform geographic name usage is applied and current names data is promulgated. Two web-enabled databases, one for domestic names and the other for foreign names, provide access to standardized geographic names information.

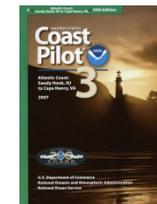
The US BGN's home page is at:

<http://geonames.usgs.gov>

## Domestic Names

The origins of the US BGN can be traced to the surge of exploration, settlement, and economic exploitation of the American West after the Civil War. Contradictions and inconsistencies concerning names of geographic features were a serious problem for surveyors, mapmakers, government officials, and scientists who required uniform and unambiguous geographic nomenclature. In 1890 President Benjamin Harrison created the Board and gave it the authority to resolve unsettled geographic names questions. Decisions of the Board were – and still are – considered binding for all departments and agencies of the Federal Government.

Today, work on place names within the United States and areas under its sovereignty is the responsibility of the US BGN's Domestic Names Committee (DNC). Support for the DNC comes from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). Every year, the DNC reviews hundreds of new domestic name proposals and suggested name changes from private citizens and local, state, and tribal authorities. The DNC never initiates a new name proposal; rather, it mediates place name controversies and rules on new name proposals using its principles, policies and procedures.



*Place names in official publications like this U.S. Commerce Department Coast Pilot provide vital geographic reference for safe navigation along the nation's shores and waterways.*

The Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), hosted on the USGS web site at:

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

(click on "Search GNIS"), is the official repository of domestic geographic names information, containing the Federally recognized name of each feature and the feature location by state, county, USGS topographic map, and geographic coordinates. The GNIS collects data from Federal, state, and local agencies, and provides data to the government and the public through numerous web applications and services.

## Foreign Names

Interest in the standardization of foreign geographic names accelerated greatly following the First World War, and the Board issued its first report on foreign geographic names in 1927. In 1947, an Act of Congress reorganized the US BGN into its present form, and from that reorganization the Board's Foreign Names Committee (FNC) was established.

The FNC carries out the US BGN's foreign names standardization programs, with support from the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, a component of the Department of Defense. Working with geographic names authorities in foreign countries, and coordinating its activities with the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use, the FNC determines policies for the treatment of foreign names, including systems for rendering geographic names in non-Roman scripts such as Arabic and Korean.

The official US BGN repository for foreign place name information is the GEOnet Names Server (GNS), hosted by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. You can access the GNS through the US BGN's web site at

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

This database contains names and locations for over five million foreign geographic features, including U.S. official standard names, English conventional names, variant names, and names in local non-Roman script. The GEOnet Names Server can be used to determine U.S. official spellings of foreign place names for cartographic and GIS applications, or just to find obscure places, such as where your immigrant great-grandparents came from.

*A road sign in Israel highlights the complexity of geographic names in other countries.*



## Advisory Committees

The US BGN establishes advisory committees to address specialized issues of applied toponymy that require particular expertise. At present, two US BGN advisory committees are active, dealing with undersea feature names and the place names of Antarctica. The membership of these two committees is drawn from the scientific communities of the ocean sciences and polar research, respectively.

## US BGN Member Agencies & Committee Affiliation

US Department of Agriculture: Domestic Names Committee

Central Intelligence Agency: Foreign Names Committee

US Department of Commerce: Domestic and Foreign Names Committees

US Department of Defense: Domestic and Foreign Names Committees

Government Printing Office: Domestic Names Committee

US Department of Homeland Security: Domestic Names Committee

US Department of the Interior: Domestic Names Committee

Library of Congress: Domestic and Foreign Names Committees

US Postal Service: Domestic Names Committee

US Department of State: Foreign Names Committee

## US BGN Contact Information

For further information about the United States Board on Geographic Names, please contact the Board's Secretariat at the contact points listed below. A visit to the Board's website is always worthwhile.

### Domestic Geographic Names

For more information about domestic and Antarctic geographic names, please contact:

Mr. Lou Yost  
US BGN Executive Secretary, Domestic Names  
523 National Center  
U.S. Geological Survey  
Reston, Virginia 20192-0523

Phone: 703-648-4552  
Fax: 703-648-4549  
E-mail: [lyost@usgs.gov](mailto:lyost@usgs.gov)

### Foreign Geographic Names

For more information on foreign geographic names and the names of undersea features, please contact:

Mr. Trent Palmer  
US BGN Executive Secretary, Foreign Names  
National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency  
7500 GEOINT Drive Mail Stop N62  
Springfield, Virginia 22150-7500

Phone: 571-557-7028  
Fax: 571-558-3113  
E-mail: [trent.c.palmer@nga.mil](mailto:trent.c.palmer@nga.mil)

### The US BGN Web Site

Information regarding the Board's policies and procedures is found at the US BGN's official web site, hosted by the U.S. Geological Survey. The web site also provides links to other sites of topical interest, as well as access to the Board's official repositories of domestic and foreign place name information. Point your browser to:

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