

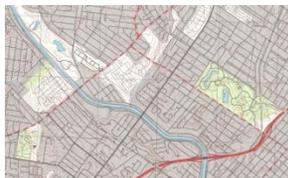
An Introduction to the United States Board on Geographic Names



***PROVIDING
OFFICIAL GEOGRAPHIC NAMES
FOR OVER A CENTURY***

(Information current as of November 2016)

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 (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 BGN represent a variety of interests, such as mapping and charting, population, ecology, management of public and offshore lands, publishing, 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 BGN has a website 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 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.

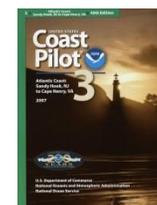
The BGN's home page is:

<http://geonames.usgs.gov>

Domestic Names

The origins of the 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 BGN and gave it the authority to resolve unsettled geographic names questions. Decisions of the BGN 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 are the responsibility of the 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, Federal, 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),

<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, as well as Tribes, 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 BGN issued its first report on foreign geographic names in 1927. In 1947, an Act of Congress reorganized the BGN into its present form, and from that reorganization the Board's Foreign Names Committee (FNC) was established.

The FNC carries out the BGN's foreign names standardization programs, with support from the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), 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 BGN repository for foreign place name information is the GEOnet Names Server (GNS). You can access the GNS through the BGN's website:

<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 the location from where your immigrant great-grandparents originated.

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



Advisory Committees

The BGN establishes advisory committees to address specialized issues of applied toponymy that require particular expertise. At present, two 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.

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 Publishing 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

BGN Contact Information

For further information about the BGN, please contact the BGN's Secretariat at the contact points listed below. A visit to the BGN's website is always worthwhile.

Domestic Geographic Names

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

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

Phone: 703-648-4552
E-mail: lyost@usgs.gov

Foreign Geographic Names

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

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

Phone: 571-557-7028
E-mail: trent.c.palmer@nga.mil

The BGN Website

Information regarding the BGN's policies and procedures is found at the BGN's official website. The website also provides links to other sites of topical interest, as well as access to the BGN's official repositories of domestic and foreign place name information. Navigate to:

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